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A REPORT FROM UNCANNYCON +
AN INTERVIEW WITH DANNY ROBINS

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NESSIE AT 90

LOCH NESS, MAY 1933:
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MODERN MONSTER

CELEBRITY SPOOKS

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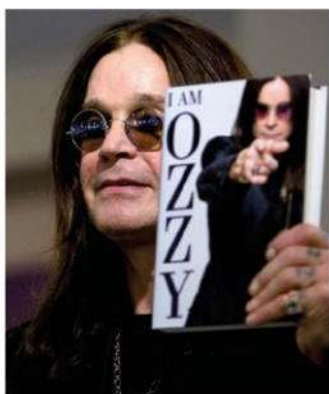
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STRANGE DAYS

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MAN ASLEEP IN BOAT

ALAMY STOCK IMAGES

REEDS AND DINOSAURADOBE

STOCK IMAGES

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



A THOROUGHLY MODERN MONSTER

In this issue we celebrate a very special birthday: Nessie's 90th.

It was in May 1933 that the Loch Ness Monster first made waves in the media when the *Inverness Courier* of 2 May ran the headline: "Strange spectacle on Loch Ness. What was it?"

It's a question that has, of course, exercised zoologists, monster hunters and forteans ever since. Crucially, it was this sighting – made by Mr and Mrs Aldie Mackay from their motor car – that kickstarted the monster-mania that gripped the newspaper-reading public of the 1930s as Nessie's fame spread far beyond her Scottish home.

In our cover story (p32), Ulrich Magin goes back to the early days of the story to demonstrate that far from being a legend-shrouded tale deriving from ancient folklore (*pace* St Columba), the Loch Ness Monster legend was busy being born in the first half of the 20th century and very much in the public eye. This is the thoroughly modern story of a thoroughly modern monster, enabled by technology and spread by not always reliable journalism. It's worth noting that the Mackay sighting was made from a motor car; subsequent encounters would involve more cars and motorcycles, while searches were mounted from the water and even the air. New roads and new methods of transport meant that tourists and would-be monster hunters could gain easy access to Loch Ness, while the increasing use of modern cameras meant that, on occasion, photographic evidence of the beast could be obtained (or faked) and disseminated through the press; some newspapers even mounted their own 'expeditions' to the loch.

But, as Ulrich argues, Nessie is a modern monster in another sense: "The

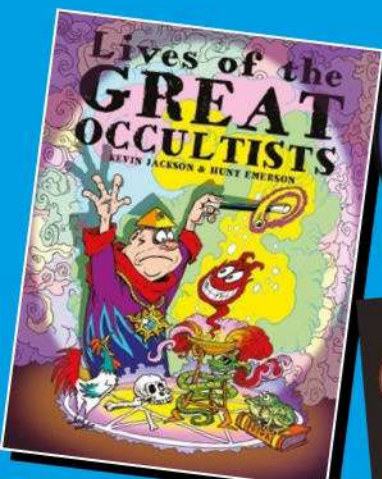
monster was news in 1933, but it was also new." There are no credible references to a monster in the loch before 1933 (vague references to water kelpies aside), and certainly no descriptions of the long-necked, multi-humped creature firmly embedded, 90 years on, in the public imagination. Indeed, early sightings contain elements that point to a whole menagerie of creatures rather than a single coherent entity: giant otters, crocodiles, dolphins, whales, dinosaurs straight out of that year's *King Kong*...

So, if there is an unknown creature in Loch Ness, did it only find its way there in 1933? Is the rest of Nessie lore just a species of invented tradition? And will the monster put in a definitive appearance in time for its centenary in 10 years' time?

ERRATA

FT428:32: Proof, if it were needed, that we don't know our bard from our elbow comes from Craig Manning of Somerset, who sent us the following: "You have probably received a lot of responses to this already. In 'The Chicago Mothman', your writer Tea Krulos uses a Shakespeare quote to open the article. Unfortunately, it is attributed to *The Merchant of Venice*. The quote 'Beware my lord of jealousy...' is from *Othello* (Act 3, Scene 3) when Iago ironically warns Othello (a man he is bitterly jealous of) about the "green eyed monster". Also, the jealousy theme is not addressed until the following issue, so perhaps a different quote? The song 'Old Red Eyes Is Back' (1991) by The Beautiful South springs to mind – less literate, but more pertinent..."

In our defence, we did in fact use the "Old Red Eyes" line on the editorial page of that issue and on the cover of FT429.



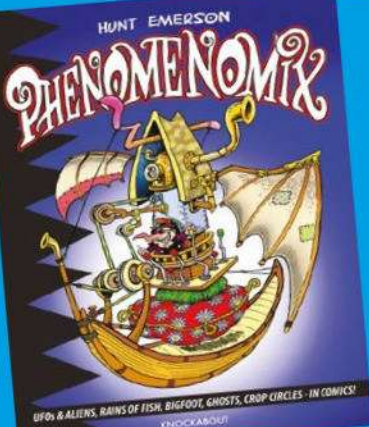
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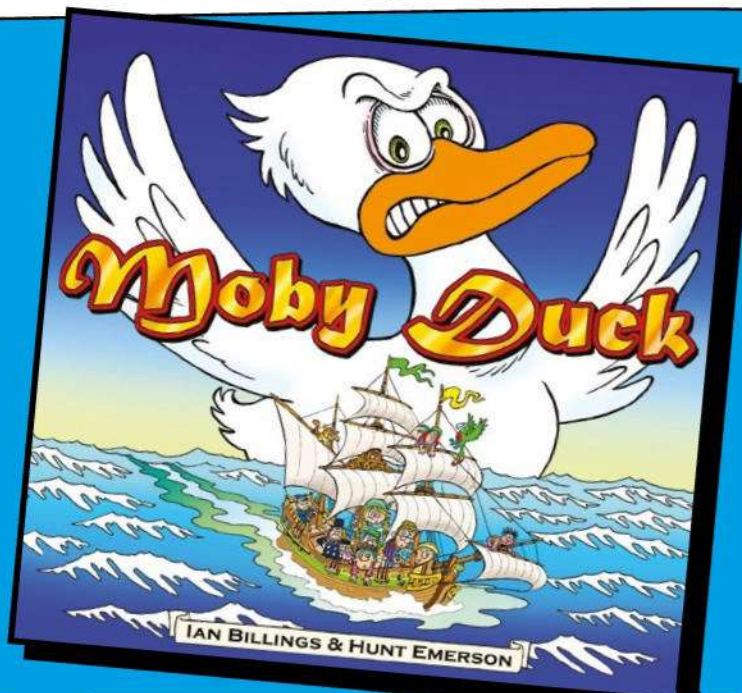
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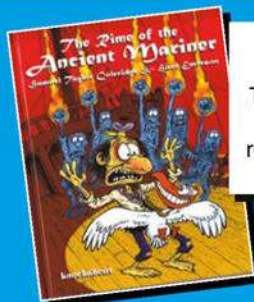
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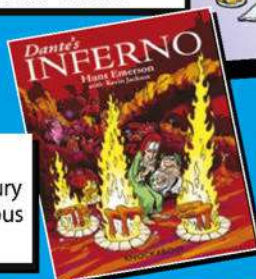
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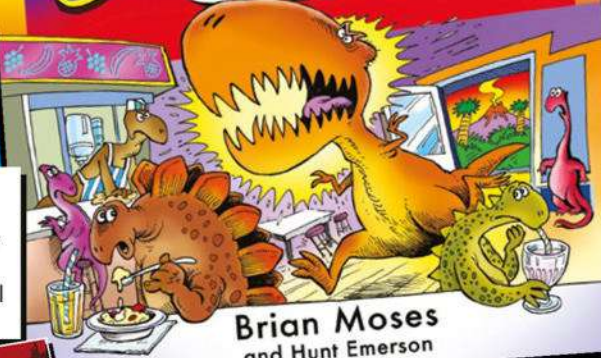
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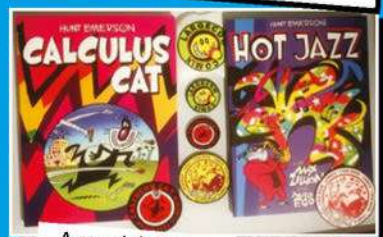


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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

FAINTING SCHOOLGIRLS & COLLAPSING COPS



PHOTOS: JAM PRESS

LEFT: A photo allegedly showing one of the fainting girls being removed from the Pasto school. BELOW: The school's head, Hugo Torres, tried to calm the situation before panic took hold.

COLOMBIAN OUIJA PANIC

Following the hospitalisation of 11 schoolchildren from the Agricultural Technical Institute in Hato, Colombia, after allegedly using a Ouija board late last year (FT427:4-5), 28 girls at the Galeras Educational Institution in Pasto, also in Colombia, collapsed on 27 February, again after allegedly using a Ouija board. All the girls in Pasto fainted, showed signs of anxiety and other related symptoms and were admitted to hospital, with one parent saying, "Parents, you have to move, investigate what's happening at school, because our children cannot continue in this situation", adding, "Our children always have a good breakfast and it cannot be said that what's happening is due to lack of food." Sensibly, the school's head, Hugo Torres, described the cases as "anxiety" and asked the community to avoid making "early judgments and diagnoses of their own", pointing out that the first two

Chris DeFlorio suggested that the girls fell ill because they had "opened a doorway to evil"



students to succumb had pre-existing medical conditions. While it appears that the Hato event was caused by the students drinking contaminated water, Torres clearly recognised this outbreak as a social panic, probably triggered by stories about Hato, and took the appropriate calming measures.

However, Torres's attempt at calming the situation was not helped by the intervention of Chris DeFlorio, a former New York policeman, who now runs the non-profit organisation New York Demonic Investigation and travels the US with his wife Harmony as a self-described "Religious Demonologist" carrying out exorcisms to "rid people or their homes of evil spirits". He weighed in by going public with his theory "that something evil is happening in the area that is targeting children spiritually and is not being addressed" and suggesting that the schoolgirls fell ill because they "opened a doorway to evil" by playing

with the Ouija board. DeFlorio said: "Early methods relating to what we know as the Ouija board have been around since the 6th century BC; it is used as a communication device to open the doorways to the spiritual realm." Although the only other case to be reported in the media has been the Hato one, DeFlorio claims that "currently, there are five documented cases occurring at multiple schools in the country after the use of Ouija boards by teens, and potentially more incidents that are not documented, for example, one previous incident mentions a teen girl standing up, speaking a strange language, and hitting her brother with a stick." He added that "another incident, reported just last year, states that a group of teens collapsed at school and suffered from violent vomiting, abdominal pain and muscle spasms after using a Ouija board to contact the dead"; this, presumably, referring to the events at Hato.

DeFlorio continued: "While most cases have been dismissed as food poisoning, unclean water, or another rational explanation, they exclude an obvious one, a doorway to evil might have been opened... The children all began manifesting symptoms after using the Ouija board. This is the one common denominator being overlooked, dismissed, or potentially covered up." Warming to his theme, he went on: "There is enough evidence here to look into and investigate all of the



BEACH BALL BAFFLEMENT

Japan stumped
by mysterious
'Godzilla Egg'

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WHEN PLANTS FIGHT BACK

The Florida
Reaper Tree and
other horrors

PAGE 13



SINKING SPIRITS

The curious
case of the
vanishing gin

PAGE 23

incidents together and try to connect the dots to see if they opened up a specific door to the Demonic that was never meant to be opened. There may be more at risk here than just an isolated incident at the school but something that could follow them the rest of their lives if it is not dealt with correctly." He added that there were questions that needed to be thought about, such as "Why were the children using Ouija boards in school? Where did they get them? Has the same board been used in multiple incidents? What or who were the children trying to invoke?" Indeed, even if it is a social panic, the first two are reasonable questions to ask, although the rest of DeFlorio's comments seem more likely to inflame the situation and lead to further panic outbreaks than solve the problem. *mirror.co.uk*, 8+15 Mar 2023.

AUSTRALIAN LOLLY SCARE

In Townsville, Queensland, Australia, 15 primary school children from Bluewater State School seem to have succumbed to a social panic after eating lollies on a school bus. The children, aged between seven and 11, fell ill 10 to 15 minutes after arriving at school. "A lot of them were saying [they were feeling], in children's words, crook in the tummy, feeling like they're going to vomit and feeling a little dizzy," said Queensland Ambulance spokesperson David Wright. The children were taken to hospital, where their vital signs were found to be normal, but they were kept in for the day for observation, while other children at the school were monitored by paramedics. Police were examining the bus to try and pinpoint the cause of the children's illness and police spokesman Senior Sergeant Jonathan Searle said: "The circumstances surrounding how



ABOVE: The San Diego County Sheriff's Department released this video of an officer apparently collapsing after coming into contact with fentanyl.

the children became unwell is a part of our investigation," and added that, "In my 18 years of service this is the first time I've ever been involved in or heard of an incident of this nature." As with the Colombian children and the allegedly poisoned Iranian schoolgirls (FT430:6), the symptoms and circumstances of this Townsville affliction conform to those of a classic social panic. *abc.net.au*, 9 Mar 2023.

COLLAPSING COPS

In the US, it is the police rather than school children who are in the grip of a social panic, this time about accidental fentanyl overdoses. With the country experiencing an explosion in use of the synthetic opioid, which is something like 60 times stronger than heroin, police seizures of the drug have also gone up, and with it reports of officers overdosing from skin contact with the drug during raids or arrests of users.

Police have frequently released body cam footage and reports of collapsing officers that have been covered by the press with headlines like "Florida Officer Collapses After Fentanyl Exposure" and "My trainee was exposed to fentanyl and nearly died", with research published in the *Journal of Medical Toxicology* finding over 150 police contact

overdose reports from 2017 alone. As a result, police have taken to wearing hazmat suits when dealing with fentanyl and people have been imprisoned for allegedly causing officers to overdose through contact.

However, Dr Leana Wen, an emergency physician experienced in treating fentanyl overdose, says: "Much of the time, their symptoms were consistent with panic attacks – i.e. shortness of breath manifesting as gasping for breath – versus opioid overdose, which results in loss of consciousness that then depresses respiration," adding that opioids "are not well-absorbed through the skin." Dr Andrew Stolbach, a medical toxicologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital, said: "It's not possible to overdose on fentanyl by touching it. If it was absorbed well through the skin, people wouldn't inject it and snort it in order to get high."

It seems, then, that the "overdoses" are the result of a social panic spread by inflammatory news stories, dramatic film of officers dealing with fentanyl in hazmat suits and the police rumour mill, rather than an epidemic of accidental contact poisonings. *buzzfeednews.com*, *nbcnews.com*, 7 Aug 2021; *editioncnn.com*, 22 Dec 2022.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

**VIRGIN CHOSEN TO
CARRY OUT FIRST UK
SPACE LAUNCH**

<=> 22 Dec 2022.

**Devil otter ate my
mini van**

Irish Sun, 19 April 2011.

**POLICE DEFYING
GRAVITY IN FACE OF
CONSTANT CUTS,
WARNS CHIEF**

(Wolverhampton) Express &
Star, 4 Nov 2022

**Biscuit bombs all
clear**

Daily Star, 30 April 2022.

**GHOST SHIP
MYSTERY LEAVES US
ADrift IN AN OCEAN
OF TEDIUM**

Irish Independent, 19 Nov 2022.

**Police shoot man
with knife**

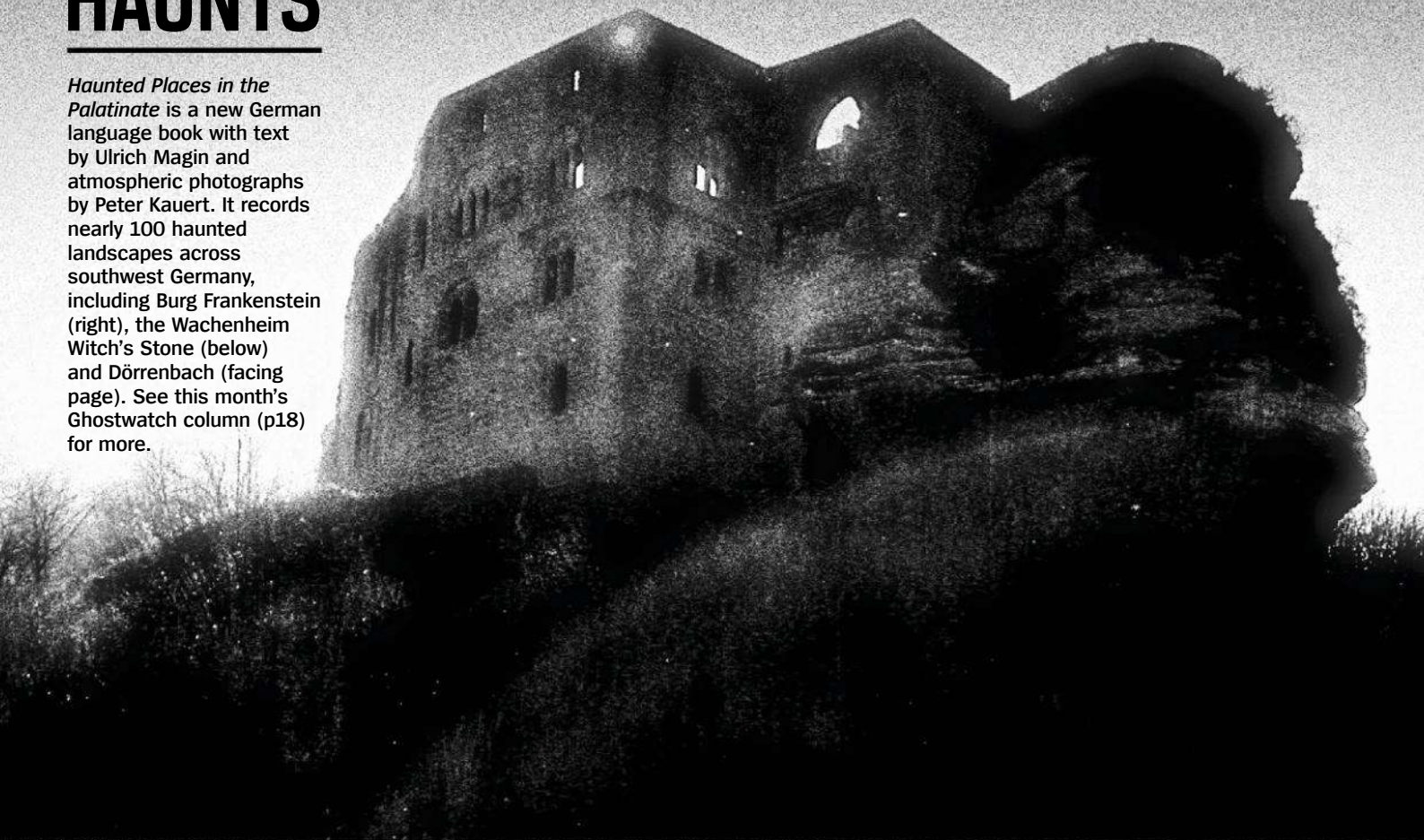
(Queensland) Gold Coast
Bulletin, 22 Aug 2022.

**'UNICORN' IS BORN
AT ZOO**

Daily Star, 5 Mar 2021.

GERMAN HAUNTS

Haunted Places in the Palatinate is a new German language book with text by Ulrich Magin and atmospheric photographs by Peter Kauert. It records nearly 100 haunted landscapes across southwest Germany, including Burg Frankenstein (right), the Wachenheim Witch's Stone (below) and Dörrenbach (facing page). See this month's Ghostwatch column (p18) for more.







SIDELINES

WHALE I NEVER!

Following a storm surge on the US east coast, residents of Rockaway Beach Boulevard and Beach 116th Street in Queens, New York, woke up to find large chunks of decaying sperm whale flesh on their streets. They are believed to have come from a whale corpse that had washed up a few miles away a week earlier that had been broken up and swept into the streets by the storm. "Wow, that is something to see (and smell), right there in the business district of Rock Park!" commented a local on Twitter. *newsweek.com*, 23 Dec 2022.

STUCK SANTAS

Police responding to a call about a damaged vehicle near Hayle in Cornwall just before Christmas found an armoured personnel carrier full of Santas on a pub crawl jammed in a hedge. Police helped extract the vehicle and no one was arrested, but local Ian Jepson said the lane was blocked for about two hours, adding, "It was quite funny." *bbc.co.uk*, 23 Dec 2022.

BARE FACED CHEEK

Officers investigating the theft of £600 of tools from a van in Coventry, West Midlands, issued dashcam footage of the getaway driver mooning at witnesses through the car window in the hope that someone will recognise the offender's buttocks and turn him in. <i>23 Aug, 2022.

SMOKIN'!

A Chinese grandfather known as "Uncle Chen" completed the Xin'Anjiang marathon in three hours, 28 minutes and 45 seconds, finishing 574th out of 1,500 runners, despite chain-smoking the whole way. Nicknamed "Smoking Bro" by other runners, Chen only smokes while running and has competed in numerous marathons while puffing tabs, only slowing to light a fresh one. *Irish Independent*, 17 Nov 2022.



MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL NEWS

Making the headlines: giant toads, driving dogs, rhythmic rats and demented dolphins



PHOTOS: KILGORE POLICE DEPARTMENT

DOG AT THE WHEEL!

Responding to reports of mayhem in a Walmart parking lot in Kilgore, Texas, police found several vehicles had been rammed by a recklessly driven SUV. When they approached the vehicle to apprehend the driver, they found that it was a dog. It seemed that the animal had been left in the vehicle while his owners shopped, and, having got bored, started jumping around the car. "He apparently got a little antsy and bounced around the cab setting this truck in motion," the police said. "The steering column had some prior damage and this pooch must have placed the vehicle in drive." He was also wearing a lead, and this appears to have snagged on the parking brake and released it, allowing the car to pinball around the car park. "It doesn't sound feasible, but an eyewitness saw the pooch behind the wheel just before the crash. He certainly has a guilty look on his face," police commented. *fox5nyc.com*, 2 Dec 2022.

RATS GOT RHYTHM

Humans were once thought to be the only organism that could recognise the beat of a song and synchronise the movements of

Several vehicles had been rammed by a recklessly driven SUV



their body to it, a behaviour known as beat synchronisation, but a few years ago it was confirmed that parrots do it too. Now, Hirokazu Takahashi, from the University of Tokyo, has found that rats bob their heads in time to music as well and respond to the same tempos that humans do. They made their discovery by tracking the motions of animals with wireless accelerometers while playing them various pieces of music,

ABOVE: The scene at the Walmart parking lot in Kilgore, Texas. BELOW LEFT: The dangerous driver responsible: a guilty-looking dog.

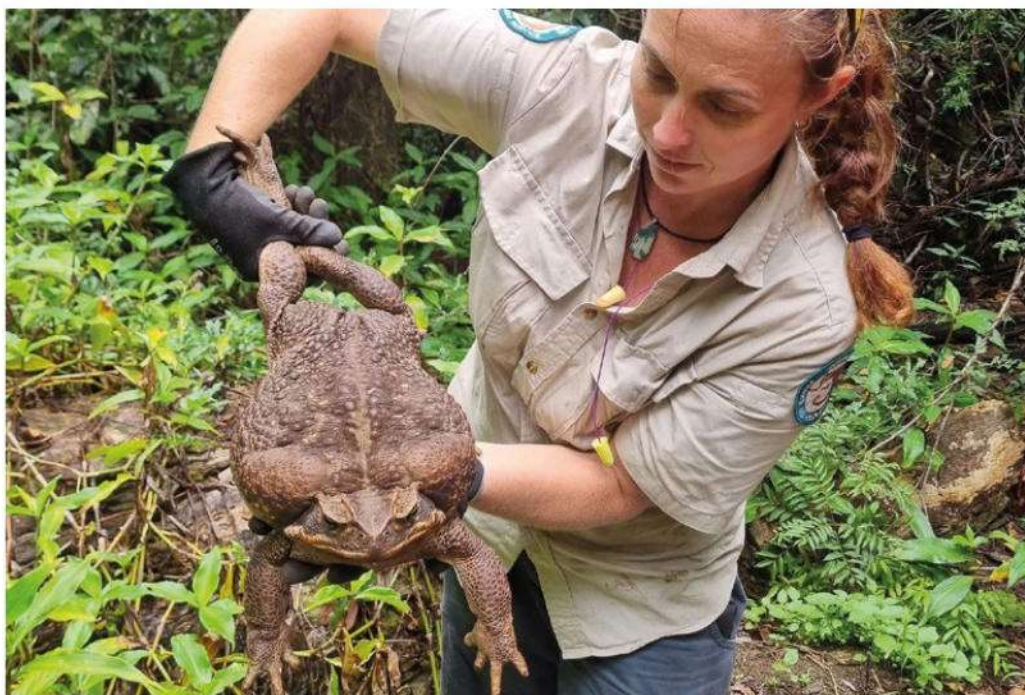
including Mozart, Lady Gaga and Queen at different speeds. They expected that body size would affect the tempos to which the rats would respond, with the smaller creatures reacting to higher speeds, but they found that all rats preferred the 120 to 140 beats per minute that humans like. *sciencenews.org*, 23 Nov 2022.

TOADZILLA

Since it was introduced in 1935, the cane toad has become one of Australia's most resilient and destructive pests. Brought in to combat the cane beetle that was plaguing sugar cane crops, the toads showed scant interest in eating the insects and instead took to massacring the local wildlife, partly by eating them and partly by poisoning anything that tried to eat them with toxic secretions. Now numbering in their hundreds of millions, all attempts at eradication have utterly failed to stem the march of the cane toads. Recently, park ranger Kylee Gray found a monster cane toad so massive she at first thought it was a fake.



QUEENSLAND DEPT OF ENVIRONMENT



ABOVE: Park Ranger Kylee Gray with the monster known as 'Toadzilla', who may be headed for a Guinness World Record.

BELOW: The surprisingly agile two-legged fox filmed by Phil and Jane Carter in their Derbyshire garden.

PHIL CARTER

She discovered the giant female, six times the size of an average toad, in a Queensland rainforest. "I've never seen anything so big," she said. "[It looked] almost like a football with legs. We dubbed it Toadzilla." Her team grabbed the huge toad and took it back to base for weighing, where they found it came in at a humungous 2.7kg (6lb), which makes it a likely world record breaker. The current Guinness World Record for the largest toad is 2.65kg (5.8lb), set by a pet toad named Prinsen in Sweden in 1991. Grey said that Toadzilla, who could have been up to 15 years old, would have reached her record weight on a diet of insects, reptiles and small mammals: "A cane toad that size will eat anything it can fit into its mouth." The giant toad has since been euthanised and donated to Queensland Museum. *BBC News*, 20 Jan 2023.

TWO-LEGGED FOX

Phil and Jane Carter of Ilkeston, Derbyshire, were surprised to find a two-legged fox on their lawn. "We had about five minutes of it going around the lawn smelling and picking up some meat and then off it went like a rocket," said Mr Carter. They contacted the Derbyshire



Wildlife Trust who looked at their phone footage of the animal and said, "We've never seen anything like this in the wild before, but the animal looks relatively healthy and appears to have adapted to life on two legs." Initially it was thought that the fox might have lost the other legs in an accident, but on seeing the video, TV Wildlife expert Mike Dilger said, "I think it's probably a genetic abnormality or disorder, so it's probably happened from birth rather than as a result of an injury." He explained: "The reason I think that is because it's so adept. Its poise, balance and control is astonishing – the way it can go up on those two forelimbs and actually still eat." *BBC News*, 4+5 Jan 2023.

DOLPHIN DEMENTIA

Scientists investigating cetacean strandings are potentially a step closer to understanding why the animals beach themselves. Scientists from a consortium of Scottish universities examined the brains of 22 cetaceans from five species – Risso's dolphins, long-finned pilot whales, white-beaked dolphins, harbour porpoises and bottlenose dolphins – that had stranded themselves on Scottish beaches. They found that four of the animals had brains showing damage similar to that caused by Alzheimer's disease in humans. As a result, they believe it is possible that some mass strandings could be caused by a sick leader, suffering from the cetacean equivalent of dementia, becoming confused and leading their pods to their deaths on beaches or in shallow water. Professor Tara Spire-Jones, of the University of Edinburgh, said: "We were fascinated to see brain changes in aged dolphins similar to those in human ageing and Alzheimer's disease. Whether these pathological changes contribute to these animals stranding is an interesting and important question for future work." *telegraph.co.uk*, 19 Dec 2022.

SIDELINES

DANGEROUS DOG

A homeowner and her dog from Hockley, Essex, needed treatment for smoke inhalation after a fire in a bedroom. It was caused by a hairdryer that had been left on the bed, plugged in, which was then switched on by the dog, eventually causing the bedding to catch fire. "The homeowner wouldn't have thought for one moment her dog would turn on the hairdryer, but unplugging something just gives you that peace of mind," said a fire service spokesperson. *news.sky.com*, 25 Dec 2022.

METH MONKS

A small monastery in the northern Thailand province of Phetchabun has been left without monks after a police raid resulted in all four residents, including the abbot, being arrested after testing positive for the drug methamphetamine. A police spokesperson said, "The temple is now empty of monks and nearby villagers are concerned they cannot do any merit-making" – gaining spiritual benefit by doing good deeds, such as providing food for the monks. The monks have been sent to a health clinic to undergo drug rehabilitation and the regional monastic leader promised to send new ones to the temple. *BBC News*, 29 Nov 2022.

SNAKE ON A PLANE

A woman going through luggage screening at Tampa airport in Florida was stopped after security staff spotted a four-foot (1.2m) boa constrictor on the X-ray of her bag. She explained the snake was named "Bartholomew" and was an emotional support reptile intended to help her cope with the stress of flying. Unimpressed, officials removed the snake from her bag and returned it to her home. Rules regarding emotional support animals on planes have been tightened after various passengers attempted to travel with pigs, squirrels, and a peacock for this purpose. *independent.co.uk*, 9 Jan 2023.

FRAMED

A 68-year-old man held up a cashier at a bank in Fresno, California, and got away with \$200 (£165), but not for long. He walked with a Zimmer frame and moved so slowly that by the time the police arrived he had only got a few yards beyond the bank doors. *D.Mirror*, 26 Nov 2022.



SIDELINES...

ASH TO ASHES

Volunteers worked for several hours to clear ivy and brambles from the historic Pilgrim Tree in Pulloxhill, Bedfordshire, where John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, preached 400 years ago. Although long dead, the ash tree was a revered local landmark. They lit a bonfire to burn debris at what they thought was a safe distance, but a spark caught the tree and over four hours it burned to a charred stump as it was inaccessible to the fire brigade. *D.Mail*, 3 Jan 2023.

PHONES REUNITED

Owen Davies did not expect to get his iPhone back after dropping it in the River Wye in Gloucestershire while canoeing in August 2021, let alone to have it returned still working. However, 10 months later Miguel Pacheco found the phone in the river, took it home and dried it out with an air compressor, then put it in an airing cupboard overnight. "In the morning, I put it on to charge. I just couldn't believe it," he said. Pacheco posted pictures on Facebook, where it was shared more than 4,000 times. The background image was recognised by Davis's friends, enabling the revived phone to be returned to its surprised owner. *<i>*, 22 Jun 2022.

SUPER SKIMMERS

As a spinoff from research into the icing of aircraft wings, physicists have discovered that the best stones for skimming across water are actually fat and curved, rather than the flat, thin ones most people go for. While thin ones still give the most skips, Bristol University's Ryan Palmer says: "You can get these new exciting dynamics out of rocks that you typically reject," adding that a heavier rock gave a "super-elastic response" that produced an "almighty jump" with "huge leaps out of the water." *rte*, 4 Jan 2023.



MARTIN ROSS

HEWN FROM THE ROCK

Stories of stones large and very, very small



NICU BUCULEI / CREATIVE COMMONS

ROMANIA'S BIRTH STONES

Romania is home to the bizarre geological phenomenon of trovant stones, which have a reputation as "living rocks" that can "give birth" to smaller rocks.

Trovant stones consist of a hard stone core with a shell of sand; chemicals within the sand react with rainwater percolating through the formations to produce new minerals that expand and make the formations appear to grow. The process adds about two inches (5cm) to the diameter of the rocks every millennium and causes them to take on bulbous, bubble-like shapes that range from a couple of inches in diameter to several feet. When cut, the trovants reveal layers, each representing a period of growth. On the surface of many are "microtrovants", small spherical structures that sometimes break off, gaining the stones the additional reputation for "giving birth" to new stones. The best known and largest are around the village of Costesti, but they can be found all over the Carpathians.

Similar short-term geological processes produced the seemingly anomalous "London Hammer" beloved of creationists.



SIMON LE BOGGIT / OUTSIDE IN

TOP: Romania's 'living rocks': trovant stones in the Babele de la Ulmet, Buzau. ABOVE: Simon Le Boggit's mini-henge made from his own kidney stones. BELOW: The seemingly anomalous 'London Hammer' was created by a natural process.

This was found by Emma Zadie Hahn and her husband Max Edmond Hahn beside the Red Creek near London, Texas, in 1936 as a piece of clearly human-worked wood sticking out of apparently solid rock. Their son later cracked the rock open to investigate and found a hammer, probably of 19th century manufacture, embedded in it, completely surrounded by solid and seemingly ancient rock from the Ordovician era. However, the rock, while Ordovician in origin, is also soluble in rainwater and over a period of just a few years will fill a crack and form a concretion around any object

left in it, making it look as if it had been there forever. *dailymail.co.uk*, 15 Jan; *iflscience.com*, 16 Jan 2023.



KIDNEY HENGE

As part of an exhibition curated by the arts charity Outside In, Sotheby's displayed a work by Simon Le Boggit called 'Kidney Stone Henge (A Monument to Truth)'. This was a tiny model of Stonehenge constructed by LeBoggit out of his own kidney stones. He had collected them by urinating through a tea strainer after ultrasound treatment for the condition, and then used them to make the artwork.

The virtual version of the exhibition launches on 27 April at www.outsidein.org and the exhibition will be touring to Glasgow's Project Ability (12 Aug to 16 Sept) and to Brighton and Hove Museums (24 Nov to end of Jan 2024). *Horncastle News*, 25 Jan 2023.



'GODZILLA EGG' | What is the mystery sphere that washed up on Japan's Enshuhama Beach?

In the wake of the furore surrounding the shooting down of various balloons over the US (FT430:28), there was an outbreak of fevered speculation in Japan about a large metal sphere of unknown origin that washed up on Enshuhama Beach in the coastal city of Hamamatsu, Japan. About 1.5m (4.9ft) wide, the object was dubbed the "Godzilla egg" by locals, and there were also suggestions it resembled something from the popular manga series *Dragon Ball*.

It soon attracted the attention of the authorities who were concerned that it could be some kind of mine or a spy device from North Korea or China. After cordoning off a 200-metre perimeter around the object, the bomb squad, dressed in hazmat suits, X-rayed it. They determined that it did not contain explosives, or indeed anything else, and was totally hollow, but sent photographs to the Japanese self-defence forces and coastguard for further evaluation as they remained unable to identify the object's origin.

Inevitably, there was speculation that it was a UFO, or had fallen from one, while some thought that it could perhaps be a piece of space debris from human activity, like the metal spheres that fell last year in India (FT420:5, 421:25). However, this object is far larger than those, and unlike anything used in rockets or satellites. The most prosaic explanation is likely to be the right one, that it is simply some form of buoy that had come adrift and been washed ashore, and it had only become the focus of attention as a result of the spy balloon flap. This is made more likely by the fact that it has two handles welded onto it to which something could be attached. One local familiar with the beach, baffled by all the fuss, said: "It's been there for a month; I tried to



Authorities were concerned that it could be some kind of spy device

push it, but it wouldn't budge."

The sphere may also have attracted attention due to recent revelations about UAPs, some of which seem to be as at home underwater as in the air. One such report from the 1990s received wide media coverage in December and involved the nuclear submarine the *USS Hampton*. According to scientist Bob McGwier, who was on the *Hampton* at the time, the submarine was "running deep and fast" when an unidentified object shot past them at faster than the speed of sound underwater, which is 1,481 metres per second (3,313mph), considerably faster than its speed in air (343m/s or 767mph). "This thing blew by us like we were standing still," said McGwier.

The Enshuhama sphere may

ABOVE: Japanese authorities investigate the mysterious sphere washed up on Enshuhama beach. **LEFT:** An 1825 ink drawing of the *Utsuro-bune* by Kyokutei Bakin.

have had additional resonance in Japan due to the well-known legend of the *Utsuro-bune*, or "Hollow Ship" (see FT48:48-50, 331:38). The story tells of a mysterious object that washed ashore in the Hitachi province on the east coast of Japan in 1803. This was a hollow capsule about 3.3 metres (11ft) high by 5.4 metres (17.7ft) wide found floating near the shore by fishermen, who described it as being made of wood, with the lower part covered with copper plates, and as having glass windows in the upper part. Inside, the capsule was covered with inscriptions the fishermen could not decipher and it carried a young woman who did not speak Japanese, clutching a small box that she would not let anyone near. Frightened by the encounter, the men put the woman back in the capsule and returned it to the sea. While historians have seen the *Utsuro-bune* tale as conforming to a long tradition of stories in Japanese folklore, it has also become part of the canon of ufology as a potential encounter with an extraterrestrial and, as a result, could well have heightened interest in the Enshuhama sphere. *dailystar.co.uk*, 4 Dec 2022; *theguardian.com*, BBC News, 22 Feb 2023.

SIDELINES...

MAIL THE DEAD

After her grandparents died, nine-year-old Matilda Harvey still wanted to write to them, so her mother persuaded the crematorium in Gedling, Nottinghamshire, to install a mailbox where people can send 'Letters to Heaven'. After publicity on social media, more than 100 people posted letters there over the Christmas period and Matilda and her mother are now hoping the box can be made permanent so that the bereaved can continue to send letters throughout the year. *itv.com*, 14 Jan 2023.

WEIRD COW KILLINGS

More than 40 cows have been found dead in the White River National Forest area in Colorado with their tails missing and vicious bite marks on their bodies. Park rangers initially suspected wolves, but the nearest pack is over 160 miles (257km) away and wolves normally return to eat their kills, but hadn't in these cases. Tests for potential disease have come back negative and dog attacks have been discounted. Colorado Parks and Wildlife region manager Travis Black says: "It's perplexing, we're scratching our heads a little bit. We don't know exactly what has occurred up there." *mirror.co.uk*, 2 Dec 2022.

GIN SURPRISE

South Africa's Indlovu gin has been an international hit, with 1,500 bottles a month being exported to shops around the world. The gin is distilled with elephant dung, and its maker, Les Ansley, says that the elephants essentially do all the flavouring work by eating herbs and fruits that infuse the spirit. Drinkers have described the result as tasting "earthy". *<i>19 Feb, 2023.*

YOUNGER KOREANS

South Korea has scrapped its traditional age system for official documents and gone over to the internationally accepted approach. Previously, Koreans were deemed to be one year old at birth, then added an extra year every 1 January, with the result that someone born in December could already be officially two when they were only a few weeks old. There was also a separate system for calculating age for drinking, smoking and military service. President Yoon Sukyeol described the old system as "a drain on resources". *Guardian*, 10 Dec 2022.



SIDELINES...

SCARECROW TERROR

The Hampshire village of Droxford has suffered a series of mysterious assaults on entries for its scarecrow festival. Featuring more than 100 scarecrows made by villagers, the festival is an annual fixture in the village, but during the 2022 festival there was a spate of scarecrow abductions and beheadings. Villagers attempted to catch the scarecrow assailants, but despite hearing slamming doors and screeching tyres after one beheading, have been unable to identify the miscreants. *D.Telegraph, 26 Sept 2022.*

SLEEPING FLASHER

Police in Brisbane caught Shane Tynan walking towards traffic at a busy junction, wearing no pants and holding his penis in both hands, just days after completing a prison sentence for similar behaviour. In court, Tynan explained that he has no recollection of the incident as he was sleepwalking at the time, and apologised for his actions, but still got a three-month suspended sentence. *couriermail.com.au, 5 Aug 2022.*

DEATH TO CATS!

Scotland Island Dog Race is an annual dog swimming competition held in Sydney, Australia. As a joke, Glenn Druery entered his water-loving Tonkinese cat Gus in the race and was accepted. Gus went on to win his category, resulting in both Druery and Gus receiving death threats. "We actually had threats. Gus had threats," Druery said. "One said he was going to shoot the cat and beat me up if he ever saw us again." As a result, Gus will not be entering future races. "I think if Gus could speak, he would be pushing for changing the name to the Scotland Island Pet Race," Druery added. *pedestrian.tv, 29 Dec 2022.*



OUTBACK FISH FALL | A small outback community is becoming Oz's fish fall central



ABOVE: Lajamanu has experienced a number of fish rains since the 1980s. BELOW: Spangled grunters found on the ground.

The small outback community of Lajamanu, 560km (348 miles) south-west of Katherine on the northern edge of the Tanami Desert in Australia, is gaining a reputation as fish fall central. It hit the news on 21 February after it was reported that fish had fallen there, but Lajamanu had also experienced documented rains of fish in 2010, 2004 and 1974, while after the latest event Penny McDonald from Alice Springs recalled experiencing a fall there in the mid-1980s. "I got up in the morning, I was working in the school at the time, and the dirt streets outside my home were covered in fish," she said. The latest event was experienced by Central Desert councillor Andrew Johnson Japanangka, who lives in the settlement. "We've seen a big storm heading up to my community and we thought it was just rain, but when the rain started falling we've seen fish falling down as well," he said, adding that the fish were at least "the size of two fingers" and still alive when they fell. "We saw some free-falling down to the ground. And some falling onto the roof. It was the most amazing thing we've ever seen; I think it's a blessing from the Lord." He added that "some are still hanging around in the community in a puddle of water, children are picking them up and keeping them in a bottle or a jar."

The fish were exclusively spangled perch, also known as spangled grunters, one



of Australia's most common freshwater fish. Michael Hammer, curator of fishes at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, was sceptical that the fish had actually fallen and, having investigated previous falls, said: "Most of the time people arrive after the rain and see the fish scattered everywhere, and in that instance they've mostly just burst through with the flood that's happened locally, from a little waterhole or something." However, he added that he "certainly can't rule out fish being caught up in little storms and then dropped in other places," and went on to explain that it was "not unusual" for fish to rain down alive, as long as they were not lifted too high and frozen mid-air. "It just depends what the local weather patterns are," he said. "What forces would be needed to lift them out of the waterhole specifically, and then up into the air, would be pretty interesting." Hammer said that fish falls seemed to be becoming more common across Australia and felt there was an

opportunity to document them: "Get some citizen science going and start to build a picture. I think next time it rains you just need to be out there with a net, catching the fish as they fall."

Regular FT contributor and fish fall investigator Sharon Hill was less convinced, saying: "Although people say they saw the fish actually fall, I don't believe it. People see what they want to believe. Some fish were alive when found, also indicating they didn't fall from a substantial height," and, in this case, Andrew Johnson Japanangka seems to be the only witness who says the fish actually fell. Hill also agrees with Hammer on the likelihood of a terrestrial distribution for the fish through ruts and other temporary channels. The fact that the settlement has had repeated "fish fall" events over the years, which is not usually the case, and all of these involved spangled perch, suggests that misperceptions and wishful thinking might well be involved. Hill also pours cold water on the idea of fish being lifted by storms, saying: "This has never been documented to have happened," and that where fish have definitely been seen falling and it has been possible to trace their origin, they have been dropped by birds, either alive or partly digested, as was the case in the recent Texarkana fall that she investigated with Paul Cropper (see FT420:32-35). *abc.net.au, 21 Feb; sciencetimes.com, 22 Feb; Weekly Weird News, 24 Feb 2023.*



PLANTS & FUNGI FIGHT BACK

Florida's scary Reaper Tree, carnivorous mushrooms and John Wick versus fungus

BOOZY FUNGUS EATS TENNESSEE

In Lincoln County, Tennessee, the whiskey distiller Jack Daniel's has come into conflict with local residents over the six large barrel houses they have built to age their product. During this process, a proportion of the alcohol, often known as "the angel's share", evaporates from the barrels. This alcohol, wafting out of the barrel houses, provides the ideal conditions for the growth of the fungus *Baudoinia compniacensis*, better known as the whiskey fungus, which thrives on alcohol fumes, and is steadily spreading across the country covering everything in its path.

Residents have been complaining of a sooty, dark crust of the fungus that has blanketed homes, cars, road signs, bird feeders, patio furniture and trees and which has proved highly resistant to eradication. "If you run your fingernail down our tree branch, it will just coat the tip of your finger," said Patrick Long, who lives next to one of the barrelhouses. "It's just disgusting". He pressure washes his property every three months with a bleach solution, but the fungus always returns. Another local, Christi Long, said: "This fungus now is on steroids".

First described in the 1870s, when it was found blackening the walls of French cognac distilleries, the fungus, according to University of Toronto fungus researcher James A Scott, "is pretty destructive, and the only way to stop it is to turn off its alcohol supply. It wrecks patio furniture, house siding, almost any outdoor surface. I've seen trees choked to death by it. It is a small mercy that it does not also appear to have a negative impact on human health."

Jack Daniel's have been approached about putting air filters on their barrelhouses, but refuse to do so in case it affects the flavour of the whiskey, and when asked if they would pressure wash affected properties, they also refused



as they would be liable for any damage caused. *nytimes.com*, 2 Mar 2023.

WORM-EATING SHROOMS

The stir-fry staple, the oyster mushroom *Pleurotus ostreatus*, has been found to be rather more aggressive than is usual for mushrooms. Yen-Ping Hsueh and her team from Taiwan's Academia Sinica have found that in low-nitrogen environments, oyster mushrooms grow minute lollipop-shaped structures on their hyphae, the underground filaments that make up most of the fungus. When microscopic nematode worms press against these structures, they burst, releasing a highly toxic nerve gas. "They really paralyse the worms within a minute," said Hsueh. "It's very dramatic." Once the nematodes are dead, the hyphae then suck out their body contents. Hsueh believes that they do this to obtain nitrogen in environments where the nutrient is lacking, but one side-effect is that oyster mushrooms now can't be considered truly vegan because of their carnivorous behaviour. *popsci.com*, 19 Jan 2023.

KEANU KILLS FUNGUS

Researchers at the at Leibniz Institute for Natural Product Research and Infection Biology in Jena, Germany, have named a new class of

fungicidal molecules after Keanu Reeves. "Keanu Reeves plays many iconic roles in which he is extremely efficient in 'inactivating' his enemies. The keanumycins do the same with fungi," said Dr Pierre Stallforth, one of the team that discovered the molecules. In the paper describing their discovery, lead author Sebastian Götz explained that keanumycins create "holes" in the surface of fungi, causing them to "bleed" to death, much as Reeves does to his enemies in the John Wick films. The molecules are particularly effective against *Botrytis cinerea*, a grey mould that plagues greenhouse crops, and also *Candida albicans*, which causes fungal infections in humans. "They should've called it John Wick," said Reeves. "But that's pretty cool... and surreal for me. But thanks, scientist people! Good luck, and thank you for helping us." *esquireme.com*, 20 Mar 2023.

SARGASSUM EXPLODES

Sargassum seaweed, which gets its name from the Sargasso Sea where it grows, is experiencing an explosive growth boom, producing a massive bloom of seaweed 5,000 miles (8,000km) across, which is visible from space and poised to start washing ashore in Florida and around the Caribbean. "What we're seeing in the satellite

LEFT: The 'Reaper Tree' outside the Florida town of Brooksville, photographed by Laura Trumpold.

imagery does not bode well for a clean beach year," said Brian LaPointe from Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute. While the bloom of weed, the largest ever recorded, provides a home for marine life, it can also deprive coral of vital sunlight, and when it decomposes it releases hydrogen sulphide, which is toxic and smells evil. The weed will also block intakes at power stations and desalination plants and make areas of the sea unnavigable by boats. This year, Florida's holiday beaches have already suffered an outbreak of toxic red tide algæ, which produces fumes that can cause breathing difficulties, skin irritation and burning eyes and the sargassum promises to continue to make beaches unpleasant for much of the summer. *thefloridastandard.com*, 13 Mar 2023.

DON'T FEAR THE REAPER TREE

Another Florida growth has been causing a stir on social media. Images of a "very creepy" tree outside Brooksville went viral after it was posted on Facebook by local Laura Trumpold. The tree resembles a spindly skeletal figure with a cloak waiting to cross the road. Trumpold described it as "The Florida Reaper: One of the creepiest looking dead trees I've ever seen and I pass it every night on the way home," adding: "I go down this road every night around midnight with my dog Buddy. It is always startling when we come across this tree even though I know it is there." In daylight, it is revealed to be "a mangled mess of dead vines" that choked a tree to death. High winds tend to bring it to life, Trumpold says, making it seem as if the limbs and veil of the Greenbrier vines are moving. She admits she would be happy to see it cut down. *miamiherald.com*, 14 Mar 2023.

PAUL DEVEREUX peeps inside the Great Pyramid's secret passage and digs up a smiling sphinx



ABOVE LEFT: Video footage of the interior of the hidden corridor taken by ScanPyramids using an endoscope. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The originally covered chevron structure. **BELOW:** Unearthing the sphinx near the Temple of Hathor, Dendera. **BOTTOM:** The mummy found in the Peruvian delivery man's cooler bag

BACK PASSAGE

There has been much media hullabaloo about the discovery of a secret passage some 9m (30ft) long and 2.1m (7ft) wide inside Egypt's famous Great Pyramid (the Pyramid of Khufu). Though its presence was actually known about back in 2016, its interior has only now been imaged. Its early detection was by means of muography, used in this case to study how muons, by-products of cosmic rays, penetrated the mass of the pyramid, showing variations in their absorption by the stones. This revealed a void behind a now exposed chevron structure on the north face of the pyramid that had originally been covered by the smooth white limestone facing slabs that had once cladded all sides of the mighty monument. The chevron structure is several metres above Al-Mamun's forced entrance in the Middle Ages, which today forms the main entrance for visitors. Other non-invasive investigations were conducted with radar and ultrasound, and now, finally, with an endoscope – a thin tube containing a tiny video camera usually used for medical examination – which was eased through a joint between the chevron stones. For the first time, the investigators, an international consortium of universities forming the 'ScanPyramids' project, could actually see the inside of the 4,500-year-old stone corridor or long chamber with its vaulted roof.

The big question is: what was it for? Present opinion suggests that it is an engineering feature to help re-distribute the pyramid's weight to protect a hidden chamber either beneath the passage or beyond its currently unexplored end. (Such weight distributing voids already exist in the pyramid, such as over the King's Chamber.) But only time will tell. *BBC News, 2 Mar*



2023, and many others. Original source: *Nature Communications 14*, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-36351-0>

ANOTHER SPHINX

While on ancient Egyptian matters, we should mention the unearthing of a finely carved limestone sphinx and shrine at Dendera. The sphinx belongs to Roman era Egypt (30 BC – c.AD 641), and its smiling and dimpled features have been controversially interpreted as representing those of the Roman Emperor Claudius. This sphinx is only a mini version of the 20m (66 ft)-tall colossus at Giza, dated to c.2,500 BC. *phys.org, 6 Mar 2023*.

FIRST FLUSH

We tend to think that flushing toilets are 'mod cons' and that they were unknown in the ancient world. Not so. Chinese archaeologists have uncovered the 2,500-year-old remnants of a toilet bowl with attached waste pipe at the site of an ancient palace in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, central China. The pipe would have led to an outside pit.

This is the most ancient toilet of its kind yet found in China, and one of the oldest in the world. It didn't flush automatically, though; because the loo would have been for accommodating high status bowel movements, servants would have been on hand to manually pour water down the bowl after each use. The researchers will be examining the bowl for faeces to obtain an insight into diet. *livescience.com, 22 Feb 2023*.

SPIRITUAL GIRLFRIEND

This column has reported on some bizarre archaeology-related stories over the years, but here's one that 'takes the biscuit'. Peruvian police, who were called about a delivery man behaving drunkenly at an archaeological site in Puno, found an 800-year-old bandaged mummy in a typical Inca foetal position in his cooler bag. The man referred to it as 'Juanita' and said it was his 'spiritual girlfriend'. He lived with it in his flat, but had brought it out to show to friends. He claimed it was his father who originally owned the mummy, but gave no further details. Not being an archaeologist, he didn't know that 'Juanita' was actually the mummy of a short man who had been at least 45 years old when he died. The delivery fellow is being investigated. *BBC News, 28 Feb 2023*.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

283: WEATHER OR..?

For my earlier and more detailed reflections, see *The Salisbury Review* 13, 1994, 21-3, accessible from the magazine's digital archive.

Strange weather phenomena are, of course, one of Fort's major preoccupations, with hundreds of examples from 1800 to his own time. A sign of our own time is the efflorescence of website articles attributing the fall of ancient civilisations to the dual effect of pandemics and climate change, a somewhat discouraging trend.

One of these two claims is demonstrably wrong. For ancient pandemics, see my column in **FT392:14**. There is a detectable pattern. The plagues appear from nowhere, ravage, go away, recur (often with redoubled virulence), then vanish. Athens did not fall from its epidemic, nor did Rome from its BC/AD outbreaks, nor Byzantium from the great sixth-century one under Justinian (AD 527-65), surviving and lasting for nearly 1,000 years. There are more theories about the fall of Rome than I've had hot dinners...

Climate change and its long-term effects is a far more complex matter than the fanatic doomsayers would have us believe. The oldest-known example of catastrophe has been argued to be a 300-year drought that caused the collapse of the Akkadian empire of Sargon and successors in Mesopotamia, on which see the elaborate article by John Noble Wilford, *New York Times*, 24 August 1993 (available online), citing the investigations of archaeologists, geologists and soil scientists, (prime example Dr Harvey Weiss of Yale).

Nutshell view of my own point of view: obviously, we are witnessing a period of significant climate change. Point is, there have been frequent previous ones, at times when they cannot have been man-made, there then being no modern pollutants and the other usual suspects – I doubt whether chariots left a palpable 'carbon footprint'. I have a good deal of time for the perfectly respectable group of scientists who see the variegations of solar activity (e.g. increased range of flares), on which see the article (16 Jan 2013) by Charles Q Choi on the SPACE website.

Understandably, God or the gods were anciently blamed for exacting punishment on sinful mankind. This sort of thing is still around, especially in the weird world of American televangelists, e.g. Jerry Falwell blaming homosexuals for Hurricane Katrina, a line of argument going back to

Justinian who outlawed sodomy because this activity engendered earthquakes – the Byzantine Greek word for which is *theomania* (Wrath of God).

Flood 'myths' – Noah and company are far from unique – fall into this category. As with most 'myths', they probably were inspired by a kernel or more of truth – on floods in general, see my column in **FT313:18**, plus of course the 2022 inundations in Pakistan.

(Personal note: we lost our house and possessions in a massive flooding here in Calgary in 2013 – we didn't blame God.)

A fourth-century BC lead tablet at Dodona in northern Greece asked the Oracle there: "Is the severe winter we are having the result of wickedness in the city?" – see Robert Parker's article in *Greece & Rome* 63 (2016), 69-90, available online. Likewise, William Langland in *Piers Plouman* was sure that the violent storms which hit England were punishment for human pride, presaged by the tempests and floods that hit Romney Marsh in 1288.

In his *Life of John Milton*, Samuel Johnson wrote: "There prevailed in this time an opinion that the world was in its decay, and that we have had the misfortune to be produced in the decrepitude of nature." Similar apocalyptic thoughts were voiced by Samuel Pepys in his Diary entry for 21 Jan 1661: "It is strange what weather we have had all this winter; no cold at all, but the ways are dusty and the flies flee up and down and the rose bushes are full of leaves; such a time of year as never was known in this world before here."

In my aforementioned piece, I adduced many examples of peculiar climatic goings-on, including several not in Fort. In her Diary on 17 July 1793, Johnson's friend and patron Hester Thrale noted: "The hottest summer for many years known in England... no water in the pumps and the hens die of sunstrokes." Earlier (1785) she had encountered similar conditions in Florence, Italy. By flagrant contrast, Parson Woodforde complained in his Diary entry for 28 Feb 1785 that it was so cold that the bedroom chamber pots' contents froze.

The overall pattern is that there is no pattern.

(Personal note: As a boy. I was taken on summer holiday to Skegness. The landlady asked the grown-ups to please empty the chamber pots if used, because the rising steam tended to corrode the bed springs.)

Quite some years ago, I wrote a series

of articles on various 18th-century diarists for the now defunct magazine *The British Diarist*. Weird weather in all seasons was one of their abiding preoccupations.

Roman writers Lucretius, Pliny the Elder, and Seneca constantly banged on about the impending exhaustion and cataclysmic destruction of the Earth. Pliny's diatribes in particular make him sound like an ancient Greta Thunberg.

In the fourth or fifth century AD, a certain Julius Obsequens compiled a *Book of Prodigies* drawn from Livy's *History of the Roman Republic* between 249-12 BC. Frightening meteorological reports dominate his list: ubiquitous lightning strikes on individuals and buildings, floods, whirlwinds, tremendous rains, and suchlike. The jewel in his crown has to be this episode in 114: a young girl was struck by lightning and killed whilst horse-riding, "her clothing being stripped from her private parts and her tongue struck out as though the fire had leapt from her lower regions to her mouth."

In 1947, various individuals, including the sensationalist British journalist Harold Wilkins, started to claim that Obsequens was actually reporting UFOs...

Over in Byzantium, there was what is known as 'The Volcanic Winter of 536'. See for full details and repertoires of primary sources Antti Arjava, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005), 73-95 and a piece by Colin Barrass, 'AD 536: the Year that Winter Never Ended' – both online.

Zacharias of Mytilene, *Chronicle*, bks919-10.1 has this doom-laden report: "The Sun began to be darkened by day and the Moon by night, while the ocean was tumultuous with spray from 24 March of this year until 24 June in the following one. The winter was so severe from the unparalleled amount of snow that the birds perished."

Procopius (*Wars*, bks2.4.1-2, 4.14.5-6) covering the Vandal campaigns reports that the Sun went dark for a whole year, and there were frosts and snows in summer.

Over in Italy, the Letters of statesman Cassiodorus (c. 486-585) are full of similar phenomena, mentioning (e.g.) that the Sun was dim for long periods and "the seasons are all jumbled up", with a winter without storms, a cold spring, and a summer without heat, frost in harvest time killing crops and fruit, leading to emergency planning for famine.

I recommend a crash course in meteorological history to Greta and co...

EVENT REPORT

UNCANNYCON

The Uncanny podcast has refreshed the parts that other paranormal programming cannot reach, and now it's held its very own convention. **IAN SIMMONS** joined fans and families for a highly entertaining day in London's King's Place.

Over the last 18 months Danny Robins's BBC Podcast *Uncanny* and his series on the Battersea Poltergeist and The Witch House (all available online on BBC Sounds) have become a cult phenomenon in a way that no forteen programme has since the 1990s heyday of *The X-Files*. Robins's approach is to find a new or neglected forteen case and explore it with the help of first-hand witness testimony, audio recreations and experts from both sides of the believer/sceptic divide. By treating his witnesses and experts with respect and taking an eminently forteen, open-ended approach to his investigations, Robins makes broadcast paranormal investigation fresh and lively again, rescuing it from the showbiz clichés of Zak Bagans and his ilk, and the low-budget jump-scares of cable channel "ghost hunter" LARPing. Most of his cases tend towards the poltergeist end of haunting phenomena, and his efforts have brought to light some truly fascinating ones. These have either been unknown, such as the Room 611 haunting, which gave the podcast its catchphrase "Bloody Hell Ken" (FT427:16-17), and the Luibeilt haunted bothy case (FT426:46-47), or unjustly neglected, such as the Battersea Poltergeist (FT404:24-36) or the events at Heol Fanog in Wales (FT430:30-39).

To capitalise on the success of the podcasts, Robins put on a one-day UncannyCon in Central London. This pulled together witnesses from some of the most popular Uncanny episodes along with a band of experts, both believers and sceptics, to explore the paranormal in the company of an enthusiastic audience packing out one of King's Place's larger halls, with others watching via online streaming. Very reminiscent



of the much-missed Fortean Times UnConventions, the event seemed to appeal in equal measure to long-standing followers of all things forteen and to newcomers whose interest had been piqued by *Uncanny*. It was very much a family audience too, with the youngest participants being around 10 years old. The panel of experts included psychologist Chris French, *Skeptic* magazine's Deborah Hyde, paranormal investigators Evelyn Hollow and Hayley Stevens, and FT's own Reverend Peter Laws. Danny Robins acted as ringmaster for the whole event, bringing a relaxed and infectious enthusiasm to proceedings and swiftly developing an easy rapport with the audience.

The day centred on panels involving witnesses and experts looking at some of the series's headline cases, and while they were more of a "greatest hits" experience, with little new material revealed, they were notable for putting the witnesses in front of an open public audience who could ask them unfiltered questions. It was a testament to the solidity of the cases and the quality of the witnesses that this worked;

The star turn of the event had to be the two witnesses from the Room 611 case



all were open to anything that was thrown at them, and all went away with their credibility enhanced. A standout for me was Phil MacNeill, who had been subjected to all manner of strangeness in the Luibeilt bothy in the Scottish Highlands, as well as back in his Edinburgh flat, which had a curious link to the bothy and was a nexus of restless phenomena in its own right.

LEFT: Believers versus sceptics in a University Challenge style face-off.

BELOW: Families were much in evidence.

His straightforward openness about his prolonged interest and engagement with the experiences he and his friends had at both locations was refreshing. So too was Hannah Betts, who had been the subject of one of *Uncanny*'s most popular episodes. In this she recounted her upbringing in a persistently and energetically haunted Victorian house that had by turns fascinated and terrified her family, and which eventually became oddly supportive of them in dark times. Her frank bafflement at the phenomena, along with her grudging acceptance of the continuing weirdness, and finally relief that she'd left it behind, made her an engaging and credible witness. The star turn of the event, though, had to be two witnesses from the Room 611 case. Both now eminent scientists, "Bloody Hell" Ken (in disguise to avoid academic ridicule) and Gary Foster, who prior to the event had not previously met, made for a wry and amusing double act. They are both absolutely certain that they had faced something menacing and utterly outside human experience on the sixth floor of a grubby student tower block in Belfast, and equally unconvinced that the paranormal was real. Rounded off with a jolly Uncanny Paranormal University Challenge quiz between believers and sceptics, then an opportunity for the audience to meet and greet the witnesses and experts, the event closed with a live recording of an episode for the next series, for which I will not provide spoilers.

UncannyCon is to be followed by a national tour, with venues shortly to be announced, so look out for one near you; it will definitely be entertaining.



UNCANNY MAN FT chatted to DANNY ROBINS about the joys of uncertainty and the future of *Uncanny*

FT: The success of *Uncanny* has been remarkable. Were you expecting such a high level of interest?

DR: Making my previous podcast series *The Battersea Poltergeist* earlier in 2021, and seeing the response to that, made me realise that there was an appetite for a show that explored the paranormal in a way that felt different to the more traditional ones that very much preach to the converted. I found that our audience for *Battersea* was divided between sceptics and believers and that even larger group, people who are not sure! After *Battersea*, I received so many emails from people who wanted to share their own stories – fascinating and often chilling cases that scratched my storyteller's itch. I felt that if these stories intrigued, puzzled and unsettled me, then they might have that effect on an audience too. What I hadn't expected with *Uncanny* was the degree to which our audience would involve themselves – people sending us their questions and theories and trying to solve the cases. It's been wonderful to behold and I'm delighted that people have forged friendships and found social groups out of being part of the 'Uncanny Community'.

FT: There's hardly a shortage of paranormally-themed podcasts out there, so what do you think makes *Uncanny* so different?

DR: I think other paranormal shows focus on places. I focus on people. I take someone who has had an experience and I explore it with them in a non-sensational and non-judgemental way. I think the way we treat individuals makes people talk to us who might feel uncomfortable talking to other shows, and the fact that we are not going to some 'haunted location' to hang out means there's no danger of anti-climax. We are dealing with events that have definitely happened – we just need to work out what the hell did happen!

FT: Part of the appeal is that *Uncanny* avoids the partisan divisiveness that mars a lot of discussion of the paranormal...

DR: I think that's a great point. We live in a very divided, and divisive, world right now where, particularly on social media, we are encouraged to take sides in a combative way, defining ourselves by what we hate as much as what we love. I think *Uncanny* has opened up a safe space where people can agree to disagree and enjoy debating with people who are different from them. There's a lot to be said for being able to feel comfortable with *not* knowing for sure what you think about something. We have fun with the hashtags #TeamSceptic and #TeamBeliever, but the idea is that they are shifting states rather than fixed positions, and you might find yourself being both over the course of one episode. An open mind is one of the most underrated things.

FT: We really enjoyed working with Ciaran O'Keeffe on the feature about Heol Fanog last issue, but aren't 100% convinced by his sceptical argument that the whole thing is explicable in terms of human psychology in a particular setting – what about that infamous electricity meter? Are there elements to the case that you think remain unexplained?

DR: It's an intriguing case – I wouldn't have explored it for 12 episodes if I thought it could all be explained. I think it stands the test of time alongside the Battersea Poltergeist or Enfield as being robust enough to deflect sceptical debunking. There are aspects of all these cases that can definitely be explained, but there are enough enduring mysteries to keep us talking. I do think the staggeringly out-of-control electricity meter at Heol Fanog is one of those, but also the death of Echo the horse. Fundamentally, I don't believe Liz or Bill Rich were lying about their experiences and, once we accept

that, it means there is a hell of a lot of stuff that is incredibly tricky to explain within any conventional rational framework. It has definitely pushed me closer to the point of believing the paranormal is real.

FT: Some of the cases you've examined, like Room 611, seem to really strike a chord with people. Do you have a favourite so far?

DR: I have a fondness for them all in different ways. Room 611 was life-changing for me – the kind of attention it received. I certainly didn't expect people to be wearing T-shirts based on it a year later! But, the episode I tend to cite as my favourite is one of the least showy – it doesn't ramp the terror to the max. It's called 'My Best Friend's Ghost' and it's told by a woman called Laura who believed she had seen the ghost of her friend after she had passed away from cancer. But the bit that really got me was that years later she was watching a medium in a village hall, feeling utterly unimpressed as she'd been dragged there by friends... but, after the show, the medium talked to her privately and said the exact words that had been her friend's final dying message to Laura. Nobody other than Laura and her friend could have known those particular words. I find it incredibly hard to explain that one however I interrogate it.

FT: What can you tell us about the new series?

DR: It's the product of all of the emails I received from people during and after Season 1. I'm now in a very privileged position where I receive hundreds of messages from people describing their experiences to me. We have tales of apparitions, poltergeists, UFOs, strange beasts and guardian angels, each told to me by the person it happened to. And we will be returning to some of our most popular cases from Season 1 too. Expect an update on the notorious Room 611 of Alanbrooke Hall!

FT: Ian Simmons thoroughly enjoyed UncannyCon – and you're taking *Uncanny* on the road this autumn aren't you? What can people expect?

DR: I am really excited about that. We've done a couple of live recordings recently and it's been lovely to meet the listeners, but they've mostly been in London; so we've decided to hit the road. It's a really extensive tour around the UK, unlike anything we've done before. This isn't a recording of the podcast, but a proper bells-and-whistles stage show – expect *Woman in Black* levels of suspense and scares! We'll be exploring some cases we haven't done on air and we'll also look at local stories wherever we visit. It'll be fun and interactive. It will make you jump, but also think and laugh – I think all these things are important when discussing the paranormal.

FT: You'll will be making the transition to television later this year. What sort of challenges is this likely to entail?

DR: The thing I hear from a lot of people is "don't screw it up"! How do you adapt it so it still feels as immersive and creepy when you can actually see the witnesses? It's an exciting challenge. I feel like I've been handed a big box of toys to play with; there are so many possibilities of how you craft horror on screen, but also, the bigger budget opens up the possibility of researching cases in even greater detail, exploring the locations and conducting experiments to test our theories. I hope it will be a thrilling watch – event television that you have to talk about with your friends; but I hope it will retain the homespun feel – that personal connection between me and our witnesses and the listeners. I like to think of it as a conversation or a discussion. We are exploring mysteries together, going on a journey where we don't know the final destination. Long may that delicious uncertainty continue!



Spooks from Elmstein to Essex

ALAN MURDIE takes a tour of haunted southwest Germany and remembers the late Ronald Blythe



ABOVE: The Fussgönheim Palace, built in 1730, has a poltergeist that moves between rooms.

GHOSTS OF THE PALATINATE

In July 1938 a gentleman signing himself Herr Franz Jungbauer of Oberdonau (a German province created by the Third Reich after the Anschluss with Austria in May 1938) wrote to *The Times* newspaper in Great Britain, having gleaned from German newspapers there were currently 150 haunted castles in England that were proving difficult to sell. He stated:

I am very interested in these ghosts and guarantee to 'lay' them if one of the owners would give me the run of the castle and are willing and pay expenses of myself and helpers. Fee would only be payable after successful conclusion of affair. "Please let me have the address of some person afflicted with a haunted house.

Thanking you in anticipation, I am Yours
Franz Jungbauer

(Published in *The Times*, 28 July 1938)

Herr Jungbauer shared a global perception well entrenched by the 1930s that Britain was the place for ghosts with English castles as the premier location for them. That same autumn a writer in a Colombian newspaper pondered a contemporary story of a haunted house

Deep forests, antique monasteries, ruined castles and ivy-shrouded tumbledown dwellings

in the capital Bogota, declaring: "It was as haunted as any English castle" (*El Spectador*, 1 Oct 1938). Nearly 60 years later sceptic Carl Sagan complained Britain was "obsessed with ghosts" (in *Demon Haunted World*, 1996).

In fact Herr Jungbauer would only have needed to look closer to home, as demonstrated by a new book, *Spuk Orte in der Pfalz. Von Irrlichtern, Geisterhunden und Weißen Frauen* (2022) ('*Haunted Places in the Palatinate: Of will-o'-the-wisps, ghost dogs and white ladies*') by FT's Ulrich Magin and illustrated with photographs by Peter Kauert. It reveals there are more than 100 castles across the Palatinate in south-western Germany, a high percentage coming with a ghost. Many were ruined during the Palatinate War of Succession (or 'Peasants' War') of 1688-1697 with

the remains, including some still habitable today, attracting all manner of tales of apparitions.

It is a book the late Tom Perrott (1922-2013) – a past chairman of the Ghost Club and a great Teutonophile – would have loved. Even for non-German speakers, it is a pleasure going through this evocatively illustrated collection. More than just a book of landscapes, it is a book of archetypal dreamscapes, summoning up the wider European perception of the nocturnal countryside being dotted with numinous and uncanny places, particularly deep forests, antique monasteries, ruined castles and ivy-shrouded, tumbledown dwellings long-abandoned by the living, but not – it is averred – by the dead.

The book's lavish and atmospheric photographs invoke a feeling of awe and wonder, some pictures suggesting an eerie sense of presence, reminiscent of the work of the late Sir Simon Marsden. The very best convey an impression of something just evading the lens of the camera, or project the disconcerting sensation you may meet with when entering a room where you are told



PHOTOS: PETER KAUERT

ABOVE: Frightening rumours surround the Ungeheuersee (or 'Monster Lake') high above Leistadt. **BELOW:** The haunted Ruine Jagdhaus at Elmstein.

someone has recently died.

Natural features like major outcrops of rock or deep pools attract uncanny tales and legends too, of revenants, woodland spirits, and gatherings of witches. For example, frightening rumours surround the Ungeheuersee (or 'Monster Lake') in the Leiningen Sporn, high above Leistadt. This shallow moorland pond with a constantly fluctuating water level set within a deeply wooded area can clearly pose a physical hazard to the reckless and careless. Tradition also avers the spirit of a forest woman prowls at midnight ready to seize the unwary, particularly children, and drag them into the depths. Such stories are universal traditions, operating to deter minors away from dangerous stretches of water. However, other stories are less ascribable to folklore and fireside tales, with modern reports of apparitions and shadowy forms and eerie noises emanating from forests after dark. Other presences are felt rather than seen, often accompanied by a chill in the air.

One site offering opportunities for prospective ghost hunters is the Ruine Jagdhaus at Elmstein. It is the remains of a hunting lodge, originally built in 1839 and then quickly abandoned because of being badly haunted. The apparition of a man wearing a curious and distinctive hat menaced the area, riding a phantom grey horse around it. Even worse, "sometimes he grinned through the window into the living room", to the terror of occupiers. So



disturbing did the manifestations become that the last forester left in either 1833 or 1850 (accounts differ), whereafter the building was abandoned to the mercy of the elements and fell derelict.

This manifestation of a face peering through a window recalls a case published by the Society for Psychical Research in 2014 of a strange photograph of an eerie face captured by a digital camera looking into a woodland cabin in southern Germany ('A Remarkable Photographic Anomaly and its Interpretation' by Gerhard Mayer' in

Journal of the SPR (2014) vol 78, 30-43).

Naturally, the poltergeist – that most ubiquitous of manifestations – is well represented in the country which labelled it. For instance, the Fussgönheim Palace, built in 1730, has a poltergeist that moves between rooms, while the Villa Ludwigshöhe provided the base for a royal ghost hunter, the Bavarian King Ludwig I (1786–1868). From it, Ludwig launched enquiries into a poltergeist infestation reported at the Munich Inn Zum Rockergarten and another outbreak inside Haidenau Castle, both in 1840. The King required his officials to regularly brief him on events that included a selection of typical poltergeist tricks – strange noises, inexplicable stone-throwing and strange moans and sighs. Whether after his abdication in March 1848 the King still engaged in ghost hunting, the newspapers of the period, alas, maintain a discreet silence....

Notably, whilst the Palatinate is a landscape shaped and ruined over time by once powerful and violent men, many ghosts walking its castles are female, the predominant form being the 'woman in white', the *Weisse Frauen* who appears often at the time of the death of a great prince or landowner. Again, it is part of a greater European-wide tradition. Tall of stature, attired in white, she often wears a white widow's veil adorned with ribbons and with a faint luminosity radiating from within the folds. Beyond their high



GHOSTWATCH

concentration within the Palatinate, her appearances are recorded across Germany in ancient castles of families at Baden, Brandenburg, Berlin, Bayreuth, Darmstadt, Karlsruhe, and Trebsen – and spread into Poland and the Czech Republic. She glimmers and glides down corridors and through apartments inside castles and palaces as the death of one of the family approaches, taking a melancholy pleasure in visiting and hovering about those who may be direct descendants.

A close encounter with one of these phantom ladies can prove more terrifying than many a male apparition. An example is a story from Baron Joseph von Eichendorff, born in 1788 near Ratibor (now in Poland), who in his youth consorted with a friend, the Count of a neighbouring castle. In winter, youthful conversations often turned to a ghost alleged to haunt the Count's abode, and one midnight they decided to explore a chamber lying behind a locked iron door at the foot of a flight of stairs that had supposedly been sealed up for a century. Nonetheless, this door was said to open by itself during the winter months, when a slender female figure could be seen gliding out and flitting up the staircase. Eichendorff, the Count, some other young male friends and a footman carrying a lighted candelabra all went to the door and Eichendorff managed to force it open. Before he could step inside, the figure of a thin, veiled woman in a grey dress slipped out of the chamber and ran up the stairs. The servant, who knew nothing of the tradition, gave chase, following the figure up to the point where the stairs branched left and right. He was heading left when a white hand appeared and beckoned him right. He followed and both vanished from sight. Suddenly there came a hideous shriek and the candlelight was extinguished. The young men were horrified. Eichendorff, the first to recover, immediately collected and lit another candelabra, then raced up the stairs. Lying at the top he found the footman, quite dead with a look of terror stamped on his face. As they carried the body downstairs, the door of the sinister chamber slammed shut of its own accord. Similar cases of severe or fatal fright involving white lady apparitions are recorded at several locations in the 19th century (e.g. Willington Mill, Tyneside and Worstead Church, Norfolk).

Sources: *Spukorte in der Pfalz Von Irrlichtern, Geisterhunden und Weißen Frauen* (2022) by Ulrich Magin and Peter Kauert; *The Folklore of East Anglia* (1974) by Enid Porter; *Journey to Infinity* (1974) by Johannes von Butlar; *Phantom Ladies* by Andrew Green, edited by Alan Murdie, in press).



EWOMNI MCCABE / POPPERFOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

Beneath the altar they found and extracted an enormous quantity of human bone fragments

RONALD BLYTHE AND BORLEY

On 1 March 2023 a memorial service was held at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral for the life of noted author Ronald Blythe who died on 14 January 2023, aged 100. He was one of our last direct links with the story of haunted Borley immediately after World War II. Born at Acton in Suffolk in 1922, he became a full-time writer in 1953, residing mostly in East Anglia. For the latter half of his life he lived entirely at 'Bottengoms', a remote converted farmhouse reachable only down a rough and stony track, at Wormingford in Essex. It was here I visited him in June 2011 to talk of East Anglian life, books and ghosts.

I found him pleased to share memories of his Borley connection, principally because it enabled him to recollect his dear and revered friends, poet and author James Turner and his wife Catherine, two important figures in the post-1945 story of the hauntings. The Turners were the first to live on the site of the infamous rectory, eight years after it burned down, moving into the surviving rectory cottage in 1947, in an ultimately doomed effort

ABOVE: Ronald Blythe at home in Wormingford.

at running a mushroom farm business on the land. Even with the rectory gone, the label 'The Most Haunted House in England' endured from the numerous claims of unrivalled paranormal activity between its construction in 1863 and its blazing end in 1939. Throughout their time at Borley, the village continued to attract curiosity seekers and would-be ghost hunters, who pestered Turner and his wife at all hours. The couple also had a series of personal uncanny experiences themselves (though their accounts were somewhat contradictory) with Turner later writing a humorous semi-fictional account, *My Life with Borley Rectory* (1950).

Befriended by the Turners, Blythe became a frequent guest of the couple who greatly encouraged his own literary efforts. In 1948 faculty was obtained from the diocese to restore the chancel of the church by the Revd AC Henning, the rector since 1936. Blythe joined Turner and others carrying out renovations involving lifting the stonework around the altar. Blythe told me that beneath it they found and extracted an enormous quantity of human bone fragments, a discovery receiving national coverage and prompting Turner to speculate if these were the cause of the hauntings (*Daily Mail*, 27 May 1947).

By chance, their excavations narrowly missed a large crypt eventually



LEFT: Blythe helped with restoration works at Borley Church in the 1940s. BELOW: James Turner's 1950 book about his years at Borley.

happenings" (see *The Ghosts of Borley* (1973) by Peter Underwood and Paul Tabori). It was an attitude he maintained when discussing the Turners with me in 2011. Despite seeing the phantom cat, he said ghost stories only thrilled him as fiction, particularly the classics penned by writers such as MR James or any tales set in his beloved East Anglia. Occasionally, he referred to sensing unseen presences of departed inhabitants around the old houses of parishioners in Wormingford and at his own home, but he considered these routine and scarcely worthy of note. Nonetheless, recognising my own fascination, he kindly gave me his personal copy of *Stella C*, signed by Turner and presented to him by the author nearly 40 years earlier.

Though uninspired by psychical research, Blythe had long previously set off upon his own literary and spiritual pilgrimage into the English countryside, exploring it more deeply in his own book *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969), itself hailed an instant classic. A devotee of the English metaphysical poets and Anglican mystical writers of the 16th and 17th centuries, Blythe became a lay reader in the Church of England and an honorary canon of Bury St Edmunds Cathedral. Over the years he increasingly sought out and described the hidden spiritual aspects of rural landscapes expressed within history and poetry, in the process being justly called by Richard Mabey our greatest contemporary countryside writer.

Among his notable works was his long-running 'Word from Wormingford' column in *Church Times*, a weekly part-rural commentary, part-devotional feature published each week between 1993 and 2017. Many of these pieces were subsequently issued in book form, depicting and celebrating the still detectable natural patterns of everyday rural existence apparent in the life of his local village and their reflection in the rituals and holy days of Church worship.

Possessed by a quiet confidence, a believer in the communion with the saints who once trod these lands and in the resurrection of the dead through faith in Christ, he doubtless knew the lines from the service of Compline by heart: "From all ill dreams defend our sight, from fears and terrors of the night; withhold from us our ghostly foe..." Having recited these words many times at his little local church and numerous others and still writing into his late nineties, I am sure Ronald Blythe had no fear of ghosts and little time ever to be troubled by them.

rediscovered beneath the church in 1988. The existence of this spacious and echoing chamber, subject to flooding, may provide the explanation for odd noises reported inside the building over the years, save for the unexplained sound of solemn organ music.

Another curious recovery was the mysterious 'face in the wall', an antique carved fragment fixed to an outside wall adjoining the cottage and long concealed by thick ivy. Unearthed many years earlier when the Bull family occupied the rectory, it appeared to be part of a mediæval carving. Blythe sketched it for ghost hunter Peter Underwood, its rediscovery boosting popular convictions that a mediæval building had once occupied the former rectory site.

It was one evening, while staying at the rectory cottage in 1948, that Blythe saw a ghost for himself. Going into the upstairs bathroom to wash his hands before dinner, he spotted a strange cat. Initially thinking it was Holly, one of the two cats belonging to the Turners, he quickly realised it did not resemble their pets even slightly. Even more puzzling was its sudden disappearance. Blythe went downstairs and told Turner, who revealed a series of sightings of ghostly cats or anomalous animals roaming in and around the cottage.

After an earlier visit by Harry Price (1881-1948; see **FT229:28-34, 338:16-18**) to Borley, James Turner was attracted increasingly to psychical matters. Later moving to Cornwall, he enthusiastically

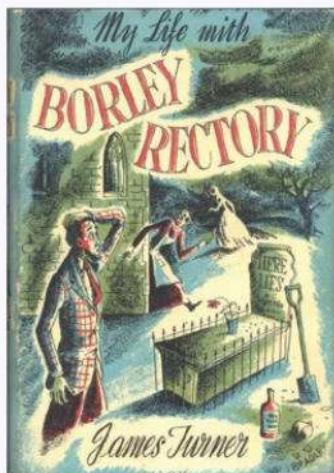
collected West County ghost stories (published as *Ghosts in the South-West* (1975) and in a tribute to Price edited and issued *Stella C: An Account of Some Original Experiments in Psychical Research* (1973), the records of experimental sessions conducted by Price with the English trance medium Stella Cranshaw (1900-1986) in the early 1920s.

Temperature variations, object movements and damage to furniture and the production of ectoplasm were among well-witnessed manifestations. At one sitting even the researcher Dr Eric Dingwall (**FT299:44-49, 300:50-54**) – later a great Price critic – admitted he "saw an egg-shaped body beginning to crawl towards the centre of the floor under the table. It was white and where the light was reflected

it appeared opal. To the end nearest to the medium was attached a thin, white neck like a piece of macaroni..." Stella's mediumship dwindled after she married, though she did return for one final set of sessions. She was still living in England when Turner's book appeared, but amid the excitement of Uri Geller's arrival in Great Britain no parapsychologist felt sufficiently inspired to reach out to her to try and shed more light on the test conditions of 50 years before. Consequently, this

detailed study languished and was buried under numerous books on the paranormal appearing at the time.

Ronald Blythe admitted not finding any significance himself in these phenomena and, regarding ghosts, confessed to Peter Underwood that he was "no more than very slightly interested in alleged psychic





STRANGE CONTINENT | ULRICH MAGIN rounds up the weird news from Europe, from purple ponds to vanishing gin

MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS

Mysterious booming noises in India and Belgium were discussed by Charles Fort, and various humming sounds have become famous in their local areas (see **FT429:17** for a recent round-up). However, strange sounds come in many shades and intensities – sometimes they are barely audible, sometimes untraceable, while in other cases recordings have been made.

The strange noise in Steinfurt-Borghorst in northern Germany was recorded on tape. It has occurred for years, but only hit the headlines in January 2023. It resembles a draught of air blown over a bottle neck, lasts only a few seconds and repeats roughly every quarter of an hour. It is very loud and can be heard even behind closed windows.

Some locals are at their wits' end. "It has no rhythm whatsoever. It comes and it goes whenever it wants, and it is really driving me insane," said Nils Wilhelm; his wife added that it was most maddening at night. The Wilhelms asked the city administration for help who then visited the neighbourhood but were unable to identify the source of the sound. Steinfurt University of Applied Sciences entered the scene, and electrical engineers monitored the city, but also failed to find an explanation for the sounds. Two days later, the mystery was declared solved when a heating technician explained that the "cause was an incorrectly set gas heater". Since then – silence. I have traced earlier accounts of the phenomenon, but then it was described as a low and barely audible buzz or hum that caused insomnia, a complaint familiar from many sites in Germany and which remains unresolved. *WDR*, 4+6 Jan 2023; *www.muensterschezeitung.de*, 30 July 2019.



ABOVE: The deep purple pond at Sibesse in Germany – experts blamed the strange colour on bacteria.

Northern Germany was not the only place in Europe plagued by strange sounds recently. In the villages of Elda and Petrer in Alicante province in southern Spain, hundreds of locals complained of unusual nocturnal noises. The "metallic sounds" had been heard since last summer and have been explained in several ways, from secret helicopters circling the towns as part of some 'Covid conspiracy' to simply being the "hum" that – according to the source – affects two per cent of the world's population. With what certainty I do not know, but the paper says the source of the phenomenon has been traced: "The strange noise was produced by grinder trains which keep the railway tracks in good condition. As they move along, they eliminate small irregularities in the metal that occur in the rail profile due to wear and deformation. These trains have laser and ultrasonic sensors with which the grinding system is guided and, in this way, restore the rails." *www.informacion.es*, 3 Jan 2023.

The metallic sounds had been heard since last summer

WATERY WEIRDNESS

A rare natural phenomenon that mimicked the biblical tale of the crossing of the river Jordan (Joshua 3: 9-17) was reported on 17 November 2022 from the River Elbe in Germany. Strong south-eastern winds created a "storm ebb" at the Elbe Estuary, and even in Hamburg, some 100 miles from the North Sea, the water level was 1.5m (5ft) below average low tide at 4 pm. This is the third time this has happened since 2000; it had previously occurred on 1 and 17 March 2018. *www.mopo.de*, 17 Nov 2022.

In early 2023, a pond at Sibbesse, near Hildesheim, Germany, turned deep purple. Hans-Heinrich Schuster of the Lower Saxony Department for

Coastal and Water Protection blamed so called purple bacteria for the wonder. When a stagnant pond ferments, it produces hydrogen sulphide, which is just what these bacteria need, and combined with photosynthesis, they grow and grow, colouring the water. Usually, these reports occur in the summer, when even larger lakes grow turquoise blue or brilliant green from algæ growth. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 13 Jan 2023.

Police and fire workers searched the lower reaches of the river Sieg, near Bonn, Germany, for several hours on 12 January 2023 after a witness reported a man in flashy clothing floating in the water at 4.40 pm. The river was in spate, and a helicopter and police in a dinghy searched a stretch of 10km (six miles) but could find no trace of any person in need, only a construction worker's helmet. In the following days, no sign that any person had drowned came to light and the river was in flood due to heavy rains. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 13 Jan 2023.



ATTACKS ON ANIMALS

There was a wave of attacks on horses in Germany recently. It started at Hohenleipisch, Brandenburg, in November when two horses were attacked – one was immediately killed, the other had to be put down by the owners. Then, a horse was so severely wounded in its paddock at Roßdorf in Thuringia that it also had to be put down, and another was attacked in early December at Gera, also in Thuringia. The culprit in this case was a 40-year-old man who had previously attacked and wounded horses, sheep and cattle in several cases between February 2018 and September 2020. The focus then shifted to Hamburg with a much publicised attack on several horses in a stable at Rahlstedt. One animal, a mare, was wounded so severely that it had to be euthanised. As there have been similar horse predations before, police believe they are dealing with a serial killer. *Lausitzer Rundschau*, 23 Nov; *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7 Dec; *zeit.de*, *welt.de*, 21 Dec 2022.

ANIMAL ATTACKS

Nature sometimes takes its revenge. In Naples, Italy, a seagull snatched the puppy of a German tourist walking through the Bosco di Capodimonte Park on 18 July 2022. To the shock of onlookers, the gull held the pinscher in its beak and carried it into the air. It is not clear what became of the dog. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 21 July 2022.

A month earlier, on 20 June, a cow attacked a 64-year-old German tourist. She was hiking a pilgrim path in the Stubai Valley, Austria, when she came across a herd of cattle. One cow “jumped at me from behind and pushed me into a ditch. The animal then threw itself on me and kept hitting my head with its skull. I thought I would die,” the woman told Austrian newspapers. Her husband drove the cow away, and his wife was airlifted to Innsbruck Hospital. *www.merkur.de*, 26 Aug 2022.

ALIEN BIG CATS

A black panther was recently reported near the small town of Apatin in northern Serbia, near the borders with Croatia and Hungary, and made headlines in the national papers of Belgrade. The townspeople optimistically prepared traps and cages and laid out bait, police used infrared goggles and drones searched the forests. Besides witness stories, the press mentioned a paw print and a shaky video film. “The predator is extremely dangerous and we appeal to citizens to take care of themselves and their loved ones. If you encounter the panther, notify the nearest police station immediately,” Apatin residents were warned by the forest administration.

The favourite theory is that it is an escaped pet, although ideas about the panther’s origin vary: some believe it escaped from an Austrian private zoo, others from a Hungarian one. Still others blame a private owner who released the panther a year ago, mainly because some fuzzy Internet images were said to have been taken 10 months ago. Forest rangers, hunters, Serbia’s police and zoo employees attempted to catch the panther, while animal campaigners lobbied not to kill “the magnificent animal”. Trying to de-escalate the situation, Milan Miric, owner of a private zoo in Kolut, explained that any big cat would run away from humans if it encountered them, and Hungarian Internet news portal balk.hu recalled that panthers had been seen a few months ago in the Kiskunhalas region. However, highly secure barbed-wire fences separate Serbia from Hungary, so a Hungarian identity for these big cats is unlikely. Or did the Hungarian border guards push the animal over the fence “simply because the migrant was black?”, wondered balk.hu. *www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de*, 17 Nov 2022.



ABOVE: The 800kg stainless steel sphere filled with gin was lowered into Lake Constance towards the end of 2022, but had vanished by mid-December.

In September 2022, a 17-year-old German schoolchild was attacked by a cheetah in the Safari Park Beekse Bergen in the Netherlands while in Ukraine, troubled enough already, a tiger escaped from its cage and roamed around three cities in the border region with Slovakia. This time, it was a confirmed escapee, reported by its private owner in the city of Strychava. The animal made off directly into Poloniny National Park and was soon observed near the Slovakian villages of Brezovec, Klenová and Ulic. The tiger had come from eastern Ukraine, but was evacuated to the western part of the country because of the war. Luckily, at the times of the press reports, neither cat nor people had been hurt. *www.tag24.de*, 6 Sept; *news.de*, 27 Sept 2022.

PARROT PREVENTS CRIME

And now for something completely different. A 57-year-old man from Cologne, Germany, had taught his 14-year-old pet parrot Freddy to sing carnival songs, which turned out to be a major advantage when, on 4 January 2023, burglars broke into his flat. They left in a hurry without taking anything, and police assume this was because the parrot spoke (or sang?) to the intruders, who thought they had been surprised by the flat’s owner. *www.express.de*, 12 Jan 2023.

VANISHING GIN

Each winter, Ginial, a Swiss gin producing company, sinks 230 litres of gin in an 800kg (1,764lb) stainless steel sphere to the bottom of Lake Constance off Romanshorn, Switzerland, where it is then screwed to a massive concrete slab at a depth of 23m (80ft). The gin, which is said to gain a special aroma through this process, is normally recovered in the spring after 100 days and retailed at luxury prices. This year, all proceeded as normal when the steel globe was sunk late in 2022, but in mid-December the company’s owner, Cello Fisch, noticed that the container had vanished. The affair is far more mysterious than it sounds, as any gin thieves would have needed barges or floating platforms as well as cranes and a crew of divers to recover the sphere. Some have suggested the container came lose from its concrete base and sank into the mud, but there were no currents that would have caused this to happen. It was even suggested it was all just a promotional hoax, but Fisch denied this. Customers who ordered bottles of Lake Constance Gin for 100 Euros will now be offered special numbered, but empty, bottles. What happened to the gin remains a mystery. *Südkurier*, 20 Dec; *www.n-tv.de*, 21 Dec 2022; *www.augsburger-allgemeine.de*, 17 Jan 2023.



KARL SHUKER welcomes two more amazing rediscoveries by an English amateur botanist

A CRYPTO-HAT TRICK!

While visiting New Guinea in summer 2018, British tourist Michael Smith, an amateur botanist, achieved something most professional zoologists can only dream of – he rediscovered (and photographed) a very distinctive creature hitherto known to science from just one specimen collected way back in 1928. Namely, the Wondiwoi tree kangaroo *Dendrolagus mayri*, a brown-furred, bear-like arboreal marsupial – a single but very much alive specimen of which Smith spotted in the montane forests of West Papua in New Guinea's western, Indonesian half (not in Papua New Guinea, in this island's eastern half, as mistakenly claimed in certain media reports; see **FT372:21**).

Four years later, moreover, he has astonished zoologists by rediscovering two more supposedly-vanished New Guinea endemics, both within the same month! During that fateful month, July 2022, while visiting Papua New Guinea (PNG) this time, Smith spoke to some locals about a small ground-dwelling, multicoloured bird – the Louisiade pitta *Erythropitta meeki* – known only from Rossel Island in PNG's Louisiade Archipelago, last reported by science in 1916, and long since written off as extinct. However, one of the locals Smith spoke to claimed to have recently seen the nest of one such bird. So Smith obtained a tape-recording of chirping calls made by a related pitta species (none existed of the Louisiade pitta itself), and set off into the bush, playing the recording. To his amazement and joy, not only was it answered, but the bird answering it was none other than a bona fide Louisiade pitta, which he duly photographed!

Flushed with success, Smith decided while there to seek out another long-lost New Guinea native of the zoological kind. This time his quarry was a small golden-furred possum known as the Telefomin cuscus *Phalanger matanim*, a species believed to have been wiped out when a forest fire in 1997 destroyed all of the oak trees in which the only known population of this mini-marsupial lived, fringing a single stretch of river in a single valley. Again, Smith checked with locals, who provided positive proof of this cuscus's current survival, albeit in a less than ideal manner. For he encountered a tribal family all set to sit down and dine upon several newly-killed specimens! They allowed him to examine these specimens before they feasted upon them, and also permitted him to take photographs and measurements of the cuscus's



skulls afterwards. I wonder what his next rediscovery – or new discovery – will be...

www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/brit-tourist-baffles-expert-discovering-29372313#; www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/03/04/british-tourist-holiday-papua-new-guinea-spots-three-species/, 4 Mar 2023.

HAGGLING OVER THE HAFGUF

The hafgufa is a mysterious sea monster depicted in various 13th-century Old Norse manuscripts. In the scientific age, there has been much speculation and dispute as to whether this maritime mystery beast was based upon a real creature; and, if so, what that creature might be, with the consensus being that it was probably some kraken-like monster.

Now, however, the hafgufa's true nature may at last have been revealed, thanks to the discovery of a remarkable, hitherto-undocumented mode of feeding behaviour practised by various rorqual whales. Known as trap feeding and first scientifically recorded in 2010, various

LEFT: Michael Smith's photo of the Louisiade pitta: "It looks like a brightly coloured robin with dazzling electric plumage." BELOW: A digital reconstruction of a humpback whale trap feeding.

humpback whales and Bryde's whales have been observed waiting motionless at the water surface in an upright position with their huge mouths wide open, into which shoals of fishes unsuspectingly swim to their doom, fatally mistaking the whales' gaping jaws for shelter, until the jaws close, engulfing them! Moreover, this eye-catching activity has lately attracted worldwide attention thanks to an Instagram video clip of a Bryde's whale performing it that went viral after featuring in a 2021 BBC wildlife documentary.

According to the Norse manuscripts, the hafgufa behaves in a similar manner, even actively attracting shoals of fishes to swim into its open mouth by emitting a specific perfume. And sure enough, when seeking to lure fishes into their mouths by regurgitating food, both the humpbacked and Bryde's whales produce a distinct smell. A detailed study examining and comparing mediæval Norse accounts of the hafgufa with modern-day reports of trap feeding by rorquals has recently been published in the journal *Marine Mammal Science*, co-authored by maritime archaeologist John McCarthy from the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Flinders University in Australia, who had become interested in this correlation after reading about the hafgufa in traditional Norse mythology.

www.instagram.com/p/CJ_NfTnLMV/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=8e71752e40cf4c1e8f7ba96693671ea7, 13 Jan 2021; www.livescience.com/terrifying-sea-monster-hafgufa-described-in-mediæval-norse-manuscripts-is-actually-a-whale; <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/mms.13009>, 28 Feb 2023.



THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Are conspiracy theorists simply overenthusiastic dot-joiners or do they sometimes uncover nuggets of what could conceivably be the truth asks **NOEL ROONEY**.

HOBGOBLINS

As US journalist HL Mencken once famously opined, "the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the population alarmed (and thus clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with a whole series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary." Our Henry would no doubt recognise the contemporary political atmosphere as one rife with the little critters: the Russians, the Chinese, the Bug and its lurking descendants, people who don't believe in the Bug, dissidents in general, and of course (perhaps more so than in Mencken's pomp) conspiracy theorists.

Conspiracists have become the hobgoblins *du jour* of the political establishment and the news media, somehow presented as a threat on a similar level to the countries the international community doesn't like. And, interestingly, they are segmented in the market of fear in much the same way. If you lean left on the illusory spectrum, then the Russians and the conspiracists are about neck and neck in the race to destroy democracy; if you lean right, the Chinese are the real worry and the tin foil hats adorn the also rans.

What all sides agree on – at least those who inhabit the corridors of power – is that conspiracy theorists are a considerable nuisance. It's not a good look on the international stage if a country's population believe the Earth is flat, or that their own leaders – along with everyone else's – are shape-shifting lizards. And the conspiracists are a nuisance in another, more chronic way; they just will not let sleeping dogs lie.

I was reminded of the above recently when I read some new material on the apparent suicide of Vince Foster in 1993. Foster, the



The reason we have conspiracy theories is because we have conspiracies

highest-ranking member of the US administration to die violently since John Kennedy, was found in a small, obscure park on the edge of the DC beltway, a gun in his hand and an obvious entry and exit wound consistent with suicide. And that was the story that the media (with some brave, or foolhardy, exceptions) reported, and everyone accepted.

Everyone, that is, except those pesky conspiracists. In the years since Foster's untimely demise, a veritable industry of investigation and speculation has grown around the tragic event. Some of it belongs to the core themes of the Conspirasphere; in this case, the Clinton Body Count, a popular perennial of the last 30 years (**FT424:24**). Some of it, however, has emerged as a coherent alternative narrative to the official story, one that relies on evidence allegedly suppressed by official investigators over the years.

One of the crucial pieces of evidence used by both sides to support their narrative was

the suicide note, found several days after Foster's death, in a briefcase that had already been searched, and emptied, by investigators. The note had been ripped into 28 pieces, one of them missing; the part where Foster's signature might be expected. Curiously, whoever had ripped the paper up had left no fingerprints behind.

The note was assumed – by everyone – to be genuine, and so it remained for two years. But then a potential bombshell struck. Three handwriting experts, all very experienced, and one of them considered a world authority, were given a copy of the note. It is still not entirely clear how they came to be in possession of it, but no one has raised any doubts over the authenticity of the note they examined.

The experts held a press conference in Washington in October 1995. Each had examined the material independently, and each had, independently, come to the conclusion that the note was a forgery, and not a particularly professional forgery at that. It should be noted here that, even if the note was a forgery, it doesn't amount to concrete evidence that Foster was murdered; nonetheless, the discovery of the forgery cast, at the very least, some doubt on the matter and, in conjunction with other evidence, much of it disputed to this day, could be offered as circumstantial evidence of foul play.

The press conference was not well attended; few US journalists turned up, and the discovery was hardly reported in the US media. It was, however, covered in the UK; partly because an eminent UK journalist, Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, was involved in setting up the examination in the first place. Not that the UK media stood up as one and cried 'J'accuse!' The anomaly was reported and the reader

LEFT: Vince Foster – suicide or Arkancide?

was left to connect the dots.

It took a little while for the story to leak into the American sphere, but when it did, dots were connected aplenty. The affair of the suicide note that probably wasn't became central to the theory that Foster was murdered because he knew too much. This regularly happens in conspiracy theory; some signal anomaly in an official narrative is identified, and becomes the smoking gun in the minds of those who doubt the mainstream version of events. It eventually becomes a canonical part of the conspiracy process; not just around the actual incident but as a general icon of the grand narrative.

Once untethered from the specific event, such icons take on a new identity; they become the brightest stars in the various constellations of the C-sphere. There are folk whose entire education (their red pill awakening) is composed of these bright, disconnected nuggets of anomaly. That's partly why so many tropes of the C-sphere can seem interchangeable (and consequently irrational) to the outside observer.

And yet: there are legitimate, lingering doubts about the investigation into Foster's death. The suicide note speaks to those doubts. We should perhaps remind ourselves that, occasionally, conspiracy theorists find evidence that some would prefer suppressed. Or to put it simply: the reason we have conspiracy theories is, at root, because we have conspiracies.

www.independent.co.uk/news/world/foster-suicide-note-was-a-forgery-say-experts-1579504.html
<https://unsolved.com/gallery/vince-foster/>

FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

Havana Syndrome saga rolls on, London's eunuch maker in court and more race fakers in the news

COVID'S CONTESTED ORIGIN [FT408:6-7]



An updated and classified study from the US energy department, which manages a number of biomedical research institutions, has concluded that the Covid-19 virus probably emerged from a laboratory leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, but was not part of a weapons research programme. The update "was done in light of new intelligence, further study of academic literature and consultation with experts outside government," says the department, but it also said it had "low confidence" in the conclusion. This means that while they feel that, on balance, this is currently the most likely explanation, the evidence is far from conclusive. The Covid-19 virus was not found in the wild in the Wuhan area, but was endemic in bats elsewhere in China, from whom the Wuhan lab had collected samples. They were also known to be carrying out "gain of function" experiments with viruses to make them more infectious under highly secure conditions in order to prepare for potential future viral outbreaks, although there is no evidence they were doing this with the Covid virus. This technique has met with concern from many scientists because of the risk of a leak causing a serious outbreak of disease.

The energy department conclusion contradicts those of four other US intelligence agencies, who have concluded that the pandemic started in the Wuhan wet market. Here, many animals mixed in unsanitary conditions creating a fertile environment for viruses to mutate and leap to humans, and this remains a plausible hypothesis. The FBI has also concluded that the virus came from a lab leak, but for different reasons, while the CIA remains undecided. China has continued to obstruct



ABOVE: Security personnel stand guard outside the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

international investigations into the pandemic's origins, but it is unclear whether this is because they have something to hide or because of the country's endemic resistance to other nations interfering in its affairs. Whatever the reason, it is making it hard for researchers to be able to conclusively identify the origins of the pandemic. *theguardian.co.uk, wsj.com, 26 Feb 2023.*

HAVANA SYNDROME [FT426:14]



The US Director of National Intelligence has issued a statement summarising the results of investigations by seven US intelligence agencies into the likely cause of "anomalous health incidents" (AHIs), also known as Havana Syndrome, experienced by at least 1,000 diplomats, spies and other staff at US embassies around the world. Victims reported hearing loss, vertigo, a sense of pressure around the head, odd auditory sensations, headaches, nausea and, in some cases, brain injuries. These symptoms were thought to be the result of attacks by an unknown directed energy weapon, probably microwave or acoustic, used at a distance and able to penetrate

walls. However, authorities in the US and the embassies' host countries struggled to find any clear evidence of a weapon or its operators; indeed there is doubt that a weapon capable of inflicting the alleged injuries is even technically possible.

The agencies concluded that "available intelligence consistently points against the involvement of US adversaries in causing the reported incidents," and that "symptoms reported by US personnel were probably the result of factors that did not involve a foreign adversary, such as preexisting conditions, conventional illnesses, and environmental factors." The statement says that the initial research which led medics to conclude that AHIs "represented a novel medical syndrome or consistent pattern of injuries" were the result of "methodological limitations" and that investigation of the original Cuban incidents involved "critical assumptions that were not borne out by subsequent medical and technical analysis." As well as dismissing any unknown weapon as the cause of the reported symptoms, all agencies also discounted the possibility that they could be a side effect of some kind of surveillance system.

Mark Zaid, an attorney

representing Havana Syndrome victims, described the report as "very disappointing." He said, "It is inconceivable based on an overwhelming number of unanswered questions that today's report will serve as the last word," vowing to make a Freedom of Information request to gain access to the full report, which is currently classified. The US Department of Defense (DoD), however, was not a participant in these studies, and continues to carry out research into Havana Syndrome, reassuring victims that their team is "keeping the course" and urging them to "report any incidents you may have experienced and encourage those around you to do the same". The DoD is claimed to be developing "defenses" against the syndrome and investigating to see if weapons could be responsible, although they claim that their work "is not focused on creating weapons." They have, though, funded research at Wayne State University involving exposing ferrets to high energy radio frequency signals for two-hour periods over several weeks to compare the effects on their brains with those of syndrome victims. This is because they believe that there is a "strong rationale" that the Havana Syndrome has been caused by "occult exposure to radio frequency (RF) waves".

Given the intelligence community's findings, though, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Havana Syndrome is a social panic that has taken hold in the US intelligence community, particularly as its symptoms are akin to those found in other outbreaks of mass psychogenic illness, and the cause remains similarly elusive. *theguardian.com, washingtonpost.com, 1 Mar; politico.com, 6 Mar; independent.co.uk, 11 Mar 2023.* For previous coverage of Havana Syndrome, see FT359:22, 360:14, 363:4, 370:26-27, 382:10-11, 389:26-27, 401:9, 407:21, 411:26, 414:8, 417:28, 426:14.

267: BAD-SMELLING HUMANS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Dogs have a great sense of smell, thousands of times more sensitive than that of humans who are essentially “nose blind”.

The “truth”

There is no hierarchy of mammalian olfactory ability, at least according to current thinking. The idea that there must be goes back to French anatomist Paul Broca (1824-80), who came up with the idea that humans were “non-smellers”, later known as “microsmatics”, because evolution had equipped us with free will at the expense of our “animalistic” senses, letting some parts of the brain wither while building up others. As is always the case in such stories, subsequent generations of scientists simply accepted what had been passed on without actually checking it. Broca and his successors never made any empirical examination of the sense of smell of various species: they determined what it should be, according to their untested hypothesis, based on the relative size of the olfactory bulb – which is now thought to be irrelevant, anyway. More recently, practical experiments on humans involving, for instance, tracking by scent like bloodhounds and distinguishing between two similar odours, have shown humans to have “excellent olfactory abilities” that are “similar to other mammals”.

Sources

www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.aam7263; www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/05/all-smell-that-ends-smell/526317/; www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5512720/

Disclaimer

If that all sounds a bit dodgy to you, see if you can smell your way to the letters column, where tasty controversy is always made to feel welcome.

Mythchaser

I’ve heard this both ways round, and to me they both look mythical: either, if you fake a smile when you’re feeling miserable, that physical act will cause a neurological or chemical change which will improve your mood; or, if you fake a smile when you’re down, doing so will in fact deepen your happiness.



FINSBURY PARK CASTRATOR [FT417:24]



As the case has now come to court, the man arrested for carrying out multiple castrations at his home in Finsbury Park, London, then keeping the severed body parts in his freezer and preserved in jars, has been named as Marius Gustavson, 45, originally from Norway. He has been charged with 29 offences of extreme body modification, the removal of body parts, including penises and testicles, the trade in body parts and the uploading of videos of the procedures to his “eunuch maker” website. He was further charged with possessing criminal property, making an indecent image of a child and distributing an indecent image of a child.

A further nine men accused of a six-year conspiracy to commit GBH have been charged with him. Gustavson appeared in court in a wheelchair as one of his legs had been amputated after it had been frozen by another of the accused, Jacob Crimi-Appleby, 22. Among the others in court were Nathaniel Arnold, 47, who is accused of cutting Gustavson’s nipples off and Damien Byrnes, 35, who allegedly severed his penis. All the accused, and their alleged victims, are believed to have consented to and paid for the procedures – the men are said to have earned at least £200,000 from their activities over the six years. They are thought to be members of a group dedicated to extreme body modification linked to the ‘nullo’ subculture whose adherents aim for genital nullification – the complete removal of their genitals to leave their groins smooth – as they see themselves as asexual.

Cases like this, where the accused and their ‘victims’ have all consented to extreme bodily harm have always been controversial, notably Joseph de Havilland’s self-crucifixion on Hampstead Heath in 1968 and the “Operation Spanner” investigation into male same-sex sadomasochism in the 1980s. theguardian.com, 22 Mar 2023.

RACE FAKERS [FT398:24-25]



Following the case of Rachel Dolezal, the black activist who was discovered to be white, two more prominent individuals have been outed as claiming bogus minority ancestry. The highest profile is Sacheen Littlefeather, who famously accepted Marlon Brando’s Oscar in 1973 as a representative of Native Americans, making a speech that drove John Wayne to fury. Following her death in October last year, her sisters Rosalind Cruz and Trudy Orlandi said that her claim to have Apache and Yaqui blood through her father Manuel Ybarra Cruz was “a fantasy” and that she was, in fact, of Mexican ancestry. “It’s a lie. My father was who he was. His family came from Mexico. And my dad was born in Oxnard [California]”, said Orlandi, while Cruz added: “It is a fraud. It’s disgusting to the heritage of the tribal people. And it’s just... insulting to my parents.”

In addition, minority rights activist Raquel Saraswati, 39, who claimed to be of Latin, South Asian and Arab descent, was outed by her mother Carol Perone as entirely white and actually named Rachel Elizabeth Seidel. “I don’t know why she’s doing what she’s doing,” Perone said. “I’m as white as the driven snow and so is she.” As Saraswati, Seidel had a prominent role as chief equity, inclusion and culture officer of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Philadelphia-based progressive Quaker group that fights “violence, inequality and oppression”. AFSC official Oskar Pierre Castro, who helped hire Saraswati, believed she was a “queer, Muslim, multiethnic woman” because that’s what she said she was, and felt “conned” and “deceived” by the revelations. Seidel deleted her social media accounts and issued a statement saying she wished “to maintain discretion” about her employment. theguardian.com, 24 Oct 2022; nypost.com, 1 Mar 2023.

NECROLOG

This month, we say goodbye to the comedian, actor and conspiracy theorist best known for playing one of television's longest running characters

RICHARD BELZER

Richard Belzer spent decades as a stand-up comedian and comic actor, but judging from his post mortem press he is destined to be remembered as John Munch, the cynical detective on NBC's *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. But Belzer also gained some attention in his later career for promoting conspiracy theories in the popular media.

According to his IMDB bio, Belzer was "a social misfit" who was "kicked out of every school he ever attended", including college. He told NPR's Terry Gross he got an "honorable discharge" from the Army for being "too funny to carry a gun."

More traumatically, he was a teenager when his mother died of breast cancer and a young man when his father committed suicide. A cousin of Henry Winkler, famous for the TV character The Fonz in *Happy Days*, Belzer grew up in a housing project, where his mother would beat him for doing a Jerry Lewis impression. The Jewish comedian disguised his pasty, nerdy appearance with a hip, jivey demeanor and a seemingly coked-up verve. Belzer was a regular on *The National Lampoon Radio Hour*, a regular emcee at the comedy club Catch a Rising Star, and soon got his big break as the warm-up act for *Saturday Night Live*. His big showpiece, now increasingly dated, was a routine about an 86-year-old Bob Dylan.

Belzer often played some version of himself, usually as a comedian or a club emcee, in such films as *Fame* (1980), Robert Downey's *America* (1982), *Scarface* (1983), Abel Ferrara's *Snake Eyes* (1993), opposite Harvey Keitel and Madonna, and Spike Lee's *Girl 6* (1995). In *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) he plays a TV producer who offers Tom Hanks a blowjob in exchange for the



FRANÇOIS DURAND / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The omnipresent Richard Belzer – a powerful voice for the popularisation of conspiracy theories.

rights to his story.

But Belzer gained his biggest familiarity by playing the cynical Detective Munch on Dick Wolf's *Law & Order: SVU* (as it was soon known), from 1999 to 2014, making the character one of the longest-running in TV history. Belzer originated the character on Barry Levinson's *Homicide: Life on the Street* in the Nineties, and he portrayed the sardonic, smartmouthed Munch on a total of 10 shows, including *The X-Files*, *30 Rock* and even *Sesame Street*. An NBC spokesman claimed that Munch appeared on more shows than any other (original) fictional TV character.

Many of his films were science fictional in nature, including the apocalyptic porno *Cafe Flesh* (1980), *The Puppet Masters* (1994), in which he appeared as a member of a secret alien-investigating CIA bureau, possessed by alien parasites, the second remake of Roger Corman's *Not of this Earth* (1995), and *Species II* (1998) – as the US president, no less.

Since some of these shows and movies feature alien and/or conspiratorial themes, we might ask if Belzer's side career as a proponent of conspiracy theories was an outgrowth of sincere interest or merely a cynical cash grab. Certainly, he had no qualms about casting himself in the role of conspiracy theory advocate, writing five books on related subjects.

"The Belz" even hosted his own conspiracy roundtable show *The Belzer Connection*. The programme aired on The Sci Fi Channel in 2003, but Belzer's celebrity guests, such as Al Franken, Janeane Garafalo and Ice T, were completely uninformed on the subjects, while the "experts", like fedora-clad Texan Jim Marrs, nuclear physicist Stanton Friedman, *UFO Magazine's* Donald Ecker, Karl Pflock and G Gordon Liddy, were a decidedly non-telegenic lot, and the show only lasted two episodes.

Belzer's debut book, 1999's *UFOs, JFK, and Elvis: Conspiracies You Don't Have to Be Crazy to Believe*, could be

excused as a breezy, fatuous primer on familiar pop culture beliefs, but after that Belzer's career took a dismaying turn as he became a supporter and semi-regular guest of Alex Jones, the controversial radio host who (among other questionable stances) famously attacked the parents of children killed in school shootings.

In May 2013 Belzer went on Jones's *Info Wars*, where he promulgated the theory that the CIA in the 1950s attempted to use televisions to spy on people under the alleged "Operation Mockingbird," suggested Tom Cruise was being discredited by the media for making the supposedly anti-Illuminati movie *Oblivion*, and accused an unnamed hospital of killing his sister-in-law. He proposed doing documentaries as a way to make conspiracy theories more mainstream, and even asked Jones to appear in a documentary he intended to make tying together the Nazis and the JFK assassination. The show ended with Belzer suggesting the government was



suppressing information about the Boston Marathon bombing.

Robert Thompson, director of the Public Communications school at Syracuse University, criticised Belzer as a powerful voice for the popularisation of conspiracy theories: “He’s been omnipresent over the past 20 years. He’s always Munch. That tends to solidify his identity and makes him seem less fictional as someone who’s got the ability to figure things out. He’s got a megaphone, no question about that. And, as a mainstream actor, he enhances the credibility of someone like Alex Jones by appearing on his shows.”

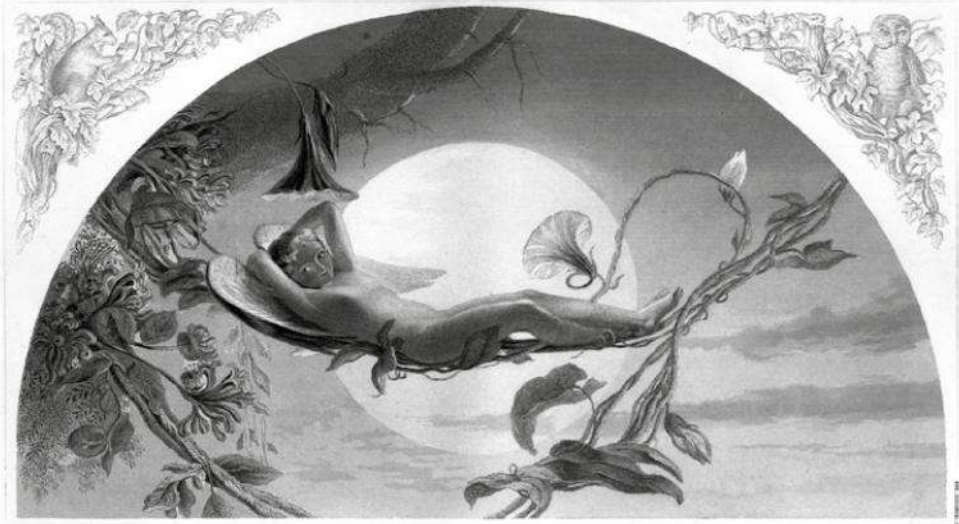
Belzer went on to co-write books with David Wayne, an “investigative journalist” based in Bogota, Colombia: *Dead Wrong: Straight Facts on the Country’s Most Controversial Cover-Ups* (2013), *Hit List: An In-Depth Investigation into the Mysterious Deaths of Witnesses to the JFK Assassination* (also 2013), and *Corporate Conspiracies: How Wall Street Took Over Washington* (2017).

He also appeared five times on *Coast to Coast AM* with George Noory, even enlisting Noory to cowrite *Someone Is Hiding Something: What Happened to Malaysia Airlines Flight 370?* in 2015. Belzer leaned toward the theory that the plane was hijacked and possibly destroyed to prevent its being used in a 9/11-style terrorist attack.

Provocative to the end, Belzer referred to the United States as a “fascist state” run by “sociopaths”. He signed off from a 2012 Fox News interview with a sarcastic Nazi salute, telling interviewer Rosanna Scotto, “Say heil to your colleagues at the other division.” He reportedly died of respiratory and heart complications.

Richard Jay Belzer, comedian, actor and conspiracy theorist, born 4 Aug 1944, Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA; died, 19 Feb 2023, Beaulieu-sur-Mer, Alpes-Martimes, France, aged 78.

Brett Taylor



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

YORKSHIRE'S WALKING DEAD

Zombies were apparently relatively common in mediaeval Yorkshire. Our best source for these northern revenants is a series of supernatural tales written up in the very early 1400s by a monk from Byland Abbey in the old East Riding. I'll give one example. Our hero, an unnamed monastic tenant from Newburgh, “was talking with the master of the ploughmen and was walking with him in the field. And suddenly the master fled in great terror...” You’ve guessed it: the master ploughman had spotted an incoming zombie. The zombie (who had once been a monk and was perhaps still wearing his robes) attacked the tenant and “foully tore his garments”. It could be a scene out of *The Walking Dead*!

What I find most striking about this tales and others like it is the sheer physicality of the Yorkshire zombies. In one case at Kilburn two men set on a zombie at the church stile and one of them held it down until the priest could be fetched. In an even more extraordinary case from near Ampleforth, a man carried a zombie woman to the house of her still living brother. The brother had doubted rumours that she ‘walked’: imagine his face when he answered the door that night...

Were these really ‘zombies’, though? Unlike the zombies of modern dystopian fiction, they had agendas: they did not just zig-zag

from place to place groaning. One Byland zombie strolled across the moor to blind his quondam mistress; while another (I find this unbearably poignant) hung around outside windows and doors hoping to be noticed by his old neighbours. The Byland zombies could also speak: there seems, in the area, to have been the curious idea that their tongues were

mute and that their voice came echoing out of their guts. There are hints in other sources that these beings also had some vampire traits: a couple were found to have imbibed blood when their graves were dug up; some were blamed for spreading diseases.

And what happened to the English zombie, particularly common in the north, but found, too, in isolated groups further south? They don’t seem to have survived the Reformation: at least, I have found very few examples of

physical ghosts in the modern period from Britain (and those I have found are mostly suspect). Our repertoire of forteana changes from generation to generation: constantly throwing out new shoots in its glorious diablery, as other shoots wither up and blacken. Don’t weep, then, for the zombies of yesteryear. Ask rather what fortean commonplaces of today will be utterly bizarre to 22nd century anomalists.

Simon speaks with Chris Woodyard about the Byland zombie tales in the latest edition of the *Boggart and Banshee* Podcast.

IN A CASE NEAR
AMPLEFORTH, A
MAN CARRIED A
ZOMBIE WOMAN
TO THE HOUSE OF
HER STILL LIVING
BROTHER



Ufology: behind the curve?

NIGEL WATSON looks at debates about the nature of abductions and the influence of SF imagery

MEASURING A MYSTERY

In the late 1980s the interest in alien abductions reached its peak, and the scholarly two-volume *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery* by folklorist Thomas Bullard inflamed a debate between those who regarded abductions as real events and those who saw them as the product of psycho-sociological factors. The former faction tended, with a few notable exceptions, to be based in the USA, and the latter in Europe.

Much of the debate was carried out from 1989 onwards in the pages of *Magonia* magazine, and was mainly kicked off by Bullard in his article "The American Way: Truth, Justice and Abduction" (*Magonia* 34, Oct 1989). His main point was that: "The belief in abduction by extraterrestrials has a firm rational basis, whether that belief is right or wrong."

As he says, the literal view of abductions as being encounters with extraterrestrials (the extraterrestrial hypothesis, or ETH) might be naive, but it is self-contained and has a sympathy for the abductees who are closest to the strange event/experience. In contrast, those who support the psychosocial hypothesis (PSH) approach, with their "subjectivist sophistication", are rash to reject these stories simply because they are fantastic. This PSH viewpoint can also seem arrogant and harmful to abductees who need some form of help or at least understanding. Bullard concludes: "If taking witnesses at their word sets the literalistic belief on a foundation of shifting sand, that base is still firmer than the thin air of theoretical speculations."

He was taken aback by Peter Rogerson, Martin Kottmeyer, Hilary Evans and Dennis Stillings, who responded with strong attacks on Bullard's support for the ETH in the pages of *Magonia*, and he responded to their criticisms "like any good American" by circling "the waggons [to] defend my scalp". He summed up his reply to his PSH critics: "The evidence as I see it shows me a puzzle that I cannot solve with reference to conventional phenomena known to me, nor have the alternatives offered by psychosocial advocates proved adequate to the task. On the other hand a literal reading best fits the story line."

Courtesy of Isaac Koi, Thomas Bullard's 414-page Volume 1 and 449-page Volume 2 of *UFO Abductions: The Measure of a Mystery* are now available online, so you can check them out for yourself.

<http://magoniamagazine.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-american-way-truth-justice-and.html>; <http://magoniamagazine.blogspot.com/2013/11/america-strikes-back-further-rumblings.html>; <https://isaackoiup.blogspot.com/2022/12/now-online-monumental-and-mammoth-ufo.html>



[com/2013/11/america-strikes-back-further-rumblings.html](https://isaackoiup.blogspot.com/2022/12/now-online-monumental-and-mammoth-ufo.html); <https://isaackoiup.blogspot.com/2022/12/now-online-monumental-and-mammoth-ufo.html>

MYTHOPOETIC SOURCES

Platillos volantes antes de los ovnis y la ufología ('Flying saucers before UFOs and ufology') by Marc Hallet, a veteran Belgian UFO researcher, is now available in PDF format (Spanish text). Sergio Sánchez Rodríguez, in a short introduction, informs us that Hallet was originally influenced by the writings of contactee George Adamski, but he subsequently came to believe Adamski was a hoaxer.

Following on from the milestone book *Science-fiction et soucoupes volantes* by Bertrand Méheust (Mercure de France, 1978), Hallet in this volume reproduces over 100 illustrations from pulp science fiction magazines in the pre-1947 Arnold era. Méheust felt that science fiction and ufology both drew from the same "common mythopoetic source", and Hallet provides us with a wonderful collection of material that does suggest a sociocultural link between SF and ufology. He notes that in the 20th century, science fiction writers and illustrators "mainly imagined two types of devices: 1) those derived from the classic rocket or airships, which were represented in the form of cylinders, pointed or not, and 2) those with a simply spheroidal appearance (sometimes faceted). Most of these ships had rows of circular or rectangular portholes. Some of these devices were smooth and others showed many bolts and rivets.'

The 'saucers' described by Arnold were more like flying wings, something of the type illustrated in a 1930 edition of *Amazing Stories Quarterly*. More tellingly, Hallet observes that a continuing theme of pulp SF stories was the use of lightning "that disintegrates, paralyses or teleports. Also the concept of kidnapping, as well as the surgery or medical examination on a table provided for this purpose and often surrounded by mystery devices." They offer the same mise-en-scène of later close encounter and abduction stories. It is significant that when Ray Palmer became editor of *Amazing Stories* in 1938 he added sections on paranormal subjects and the notorious Shaver Mysteries (**FT127:36-41, 355:40-45**) and "this subtle mixture of reality and fiction was, in a way, his registered trademark," notes Hallet.

Illustrations from American SF publications are provided by Hallet in chronological order from 1927 to 1947, showing aerial vehicles of all shapes and sizes that evoke the type of craft seen after 1947. Hallet does not think these comparisons are coincidental, but, beyond that, readers are left to make up their own minds. Among the many striking images is one from *Amazing Stories*, April 1934, of a human prisoner escorted by tall, spindly, humanoid aliens with huge heads (above left).

The impact of such stories and illustrations does seem to set the agenda and foundation for ufology; although the aforementioned Thomas Bullard has argued that: "Science fiction has generated so many images that some of them are bound to match up with abductions. In fact, why limit the search to science fiction? The pool of influence grows into an ocean if we include every possible cultural source."

<https://marcianitosverdes.haaan.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Platillos-volantes-antes-de-los-ovnis-y-la-ufolog%C3%ADa.pdf>
<https://issuu.com/diegoazuniga/docs/marchallet>

FOOD BATHS

Martin Kottmeyer, using his "subjectivist sophistication", is not at all impressed by David Jacobs's 1998 book *The Threat*, which revealed his 'new' discovery that aliens 'eat' by immersing themselves in tanks of liquid nutrient. Kottmeyer finds a *Dan Dare* comic strip, dated 28 July 1950, featuring a reptoid Venusian and a food bath that gives you all your nutritional needs in 30 seconds! For Kottmeyer, this indicates ufology is always behind the curve of SF ideas and history.

<http://moremagonia.blogspot.com/2021/02/a-mystery-until-now.html>



Dangerous projections

A spot of eye trouble sets JENNY RANGLES thinking about UFO perceptions and physiological effects

We tend to think of UFOs in many ways – often romantic or exciting ones. As UFO witnesses, we may react by asking: Is this when history changes, and I am witnessing an alien arrival? Or: Can this event tell us something startling about nature or consciousness and provide a new insight into how the world works? However, there are cases where what happens is almost secondary to the consequences it has on those directly involved. Sometimes, events have a profound impact on the body of a witness who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, with a catastrophic impact on their subsequent lives.

Barring psychosomatic factors – or of course outright lying – any serious impact on the human body reported during a close encounter by a witness – or, more importantly, attested by a doctor – is probably the best physical evidence we have for a close encounter.

This came into focus in February 2023 when sources suddenly decided to describe as Unidentified Flying Objects what most at the time assumed to be spy drones – or ‘research balloons’ going astray – that were crossing North America and were shot down as a threat to air traffic (see **FT430:28-29**). Such events set me thinking on how we interpret what we experience in ways that aren’t necessarily very helpful if we’re seeking a solution to the problem before us.

And this reminded me, too, of various UFO cases across the decades that reveal that something physically real can impact the body in big ways, and of the importance of correct diagnosis and a treatment pathway, rather than an over-focus on what extraordinary (or perhaps ordinary) trigger may lie behind the effect on the human body. So over the next couple of issues I will use my own recent medical experiences to take a new look at these.

I will first pay attention to the eyes, given my own circumstances – which started innocently enough, with a huge floater appearing like a UFO in my vision overnight!

One of the earliest cases in which UFOs and health came together, and today looks even more interesting to me, came up when I worked with the film company releasing the classic movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in the UK. The publicity campaign was huge (see **FT358:31**). This case comes from one of the letters it generated.

On 22 July 1975, a family of four were on holiday in Dovey Vale, Wales. Early on a fine summer evening, their teenage



It started innocently enough with a huge floater like a UFO appearing in my vision

son walked up alone onto a small incline called Wylfa Hill and was confronted with an amazing sight. A large round object was sitting atop the hill, surrounded by lights of multiple hues that the teenager struggled to describe. Inside the dome were two almost shapeless beings made up of small blobs in a state of flux and moving around. Suddenly, one started to float towards the lad, who was observing while trying not to be seen. He fled down the slope and tried to attract his father by shouting, “You won’t believe this – come on!” He ran back up the slope expecting his dad to follow, but he never did. At the top of the slope the teenager watched as the UFO and jelly-like blobs disappeared, not by flying away but by dissolving into the background, as if becoming invisible and merging into the different colours of the sky and scenery. He ran down the slope again, dragged his father up with him, but nothing was now visible at all.

This is a most unusual close encounter, which Andy Collins followed up from this initial report as he lived near the family. For 24 hours, the family just wrote the event off as vivid imagination, but then the teenager developed a sore throat and could not speak for a while, which suggested an infection. They returned home, and a month or so later the boy lost sight in his left

eye. Doctors, including an eye specialist, struggled to find any cause – especially when his sight started to return, but then the effects shifted to the other eye. Nobody could figure out what was happening. Of course psychologists were involved early on, looking for a psychosomatic cause (cases of hysterical blindness in teenagers have been recorded). But what the ‘close encounter’ had to do with all this was harder to make out. The obvious conclusion was that it was an hallucination. A follow-up three years later by Andy revealed that, although there had been much physical improvement, nobody had worked out exactly what had happened, although it was acknowledged that prior to the trip the boy had seemed happy and was doing well at school. The medics probably assumed the UFO event was part of an ongoing ‘psychological’ experience. Which it may have been, of course. Or perhaps it was indeed a real UFO.

However, what strikes me about this ‘jellyman’ case is how some of it makes more sense to me given my own recent problems. I too suddenly started seeing odd things in front of my eyes. Floaters could look like solid objects or jelly-like blobs, and it took some time to get used to their persistence, although I slowly did. And I did have other physiological troubles that may have been linked. What I think is interesting is that when what appears to be a UFO experience is described as such, then, perhaps unsurprisingly, a cultural pattern follows. The balloon-like objects floating over North America are taken to be things that they are not, just because they are called ‘UFOs’, and this misdirects us to seek stranger things, when the truth is not extraterrestrial, but either psychological or physiological.

Somewhat ironically, this kind of episode affirms the importance of any physiological consequences of a UFO encounter, but implies that sometimes it may be more helpful if instead we consider the UFO experience as the consequence of physiological events, not the reverse. It is natural for researchers to accept the UFO as real and seek to explain how it causes the physical effects assumed to be a side effect of the encounter. However, as I hope to investigate in coming issues, looking at other puzzling events, we should not overlook the possibility that when there is damage to the body, that damage may predate the event.

NESSIE AT 90

THE BIRTH OF THE LOCH NESS MONSTER

ULRICH MAGIN goes back to 1933 in search of the origins of the world's most famous, and prototypical, lake monster. The truth, he discovers, is quite different from the invented traditions – in fact, it's a very modern story of tourism, technology and journalism.

In March 1933, Mr and Mrs Mackay made a strange observation in a Scottish lake. Mrs Mackay noticed something resembling “a violent commotion in the water like two ducks fighting” on the surface of Loch Ness while her husband, who was steering their car, only observed some turbulence and waves lashing the shore.¹ Word got around, and the *Inverness Courier's* Fort Augustus correspondent, Alex Campbell, wrote the material up for his paper.

Then, on 2 May 1933, the following, more than slightly sensationalised, account appeared in the *Courier*, and shortly after, in its sister paper, the *Northern Chronicle*:

Strange spectacle on Loch Ness. What was it? (From a correspondent). Loch Ness has for generations been credited with being the home of a fearsome-looking monster, but, somehow or other, the ‘water kelpie’, as this legendary creature is called, has always been regarded as a myth, if not a joke.

Now, however, comes the news that the beast has been seen once more, for on Friday of last week a well-known businessman who lives in Inverness, and his wife (a University graduate), when motoring along the north shore of the loch, not far from Abriachan pier, were startled to see a tremendous upheaval on the loch, which previously had been as calm as the proverbial millpond. The lady was the first to notice the disturbance, which occurred fully three-quarters of a mile from the shore, and it was her sudden cries to stop that drew her husband's attention to the water.

There, the creature disported itself, rolling and plunging for fully a minute, its body resembling that of a whale, and the water cascading and churning like a simmering cauldron. Soon, however, it disappeared in a boiling mass of foam. Both onlookers confessed that there was something uncanny about the whole thing, for they realized that here was no ordinary denizen



LEFT: The iconic ‘Surgeon’s Photo’ of 1933 cemented the popular image of Nessie, but earlier reports from that year seemed to describe completely different creatures. BELOW LEFT: The *Inverness Courier* headline of 2 May 1933. BELOW: Mrs Aldie Mackay, an eyewitness to Nessie’s modern debut in March 1933, discusses her sighting in later life.

of the depths, because, apart from its enormous size, the beast, in taking the final plunge, sent out waves that were big enough to have been caused by passing steamer. The watchers waited for almost half an hour in the hope that the monster (if such it was) would come to the

surface again; but they had seen the last of it.

Questioned as to the length of the beast, the lady stated that, judging by the state of the water in the affected area, it seemed to be many feet long.

It will be remembered that a few years ago, a party of Inverness anglers reported that, when crossing the loch in a rowing boat, they encountered an unknown creature, whose bulk, movements, and the amount of water displaced at once suggested that it was either a very large seal, a porpoise, or, indeed, the monster itself!

But the story, which duly appeared in the press, received scant attention, and less credence. In fact, most of those people who aired their views on the matter did so in a manner that bespoke feelings of the utmost scepticism.

It should be mentioned that, so far as is known, neither seals nor porpoises have ever been known to enter Loch Ness. Indeed, in the case of the latter, it would be utterly impossible for them to do so, and, as to the seals, it is the fact that though they have on rare occasions been seen in the River Ness, their presence in Loch Ness has never been definitely established.

TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1933.

STRANGE SPECTACLE ON LOCH NESS

What was it?

(FROM A CORRESPONDENT).

Loch Ness has for generations been credited with being the home of a fearsome-looking monster, but, somehow or other, the “water kelpie,” as this legendary creature is called, has always been regarded as a myth, if not a joke. Now, however, comes the news that the beast has been seen once more, for, on Friday of last week, a well-known businessman, who lives near Inverness, and his wife (a University graduate), when motoring along the north shore of the loch, not far from Abriachan Pier, were startled to see a tremendous upheaval on the loch, which, previously, had been as calm as the proverbial mill-pond. The lady was the first to notice the disturbance, which occurred fully three-quarters of a mile from the shore, and it was her sudden cries to stop that drew her husband's attention to the water.

There, the creature disported itself, rolling and plunging for fully a minute, its body resembling that of a whale, and the water cascading and churning like a simmering cauldron. Soon, however, it disappeared in a boiling mass of foam. Both onlookers confessed that there was something uncanny about the whole thing, for they realised that there was no ordinary denizen of the loch. Because, apart from its enormous size, the beast, in taking the final plunge, sent out waves that were big enough to have been caused by a passing steamer. The watchers waited for almost half an hour in the hope that the monster (if such it was) would come to the surface again; but they had seen the last of it.

CORRESPONDENT'S REPORT

TO THE EDITOR: Sir, — May I columns to ex or harangue, has made in justified protest meeting of stand of reply parently gone I think, a mo tack on the p carious positic dared to sugg be formed so on a sounde people not only Highland Lea “stooped by and by a shire. Cou again. An re M. wo these two I





GENERAL PHOTOGRAPHIC AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: A view of Loch Ness in the early 1930s. BELOW: Alex Campbell, reporter, water bailiff of the loch and regular apologist for the monster's existence.

The *Inverness Courier*, founded at the end of the 18th century, had been published for more than 130 years without ever referring to the 'Loch Ness Monster' (with one exception), although it often printed stories about mermaids and sea serpent sightings along the Scottish coast.

THE LOCH IN 1933

Contrary to what many people believe, Loch Ness needed no boost for tourism in 1933. While it is true that some infrastructure was closed at this time, such as the railway line from Invergarry to Fort Augustus at the southern end of the loch,² the road that ran along the northern shore was in the process of being enlarged to accommodate modern motor traffic and steamers ran along the whole length of the loch several times a day. The loch was already a tourist hot-spot.

Loch Ness had never been an isolated area; in fact, it had been in the news in previous years for various reasons, not at least because diving experiments took place in its depths. For example, in 1929, newspapers celebrated 100 years of the Abbey at Fort Augustus, "the Lucerne of Scotland",³ reported on the "nearly finished... hydro-electronical scheme" at Foyers,⁴ and most newspapers in September 1930 had carried long stories about a Mr Peress, who tested diving equipment at Loch Ness in advance of a treasure hunt at Navarino Bay.⁵

In the summer of 1930 some locals had seen something strange in the loch which – to judge by the style – had also been

THE ROAD THAT RAN ALONG THE LOCH'S NORTHERN SHORE WAS BEING MODERNISED



reported by Alex Campbell⁶ and which had made headlines all over the world. It was in the United States, rather than Scotland, that people read the first account of a "monster" in Loch Ness, in the *Hartford Courant* of 12 October 1930.⁷ The sighting, as in 1933, was only of "a fight between two large fish" which created "a wave about two and one half feet high", and the article concludes, as in 1933, with a reference to an earlier sighting: "A keeper on the shores of the lake says that some time ago he saw a monster swimming down the lake and that it looked like a boat upside down." This keeper, we can assume, was the reporter Alex Campbell, as he was the water bailiff of the loch. The Loch Ness Monster, from the start, was associated with a person who believed in the creature and wanted to find evidence for its existence.

LOCAL SCEPTICISM

Campbell's 1930 report surfaced in various places in the English speaking world, but it didn't make a splash locally, with the exception of a few letters pointing out that there was no monster in the lake and that the witnesses must have been mistaken. For reasons still hard to fathom, things proved different in 1933. This time, the newspaper account of a vague something in the water, blown out of all proportion by a writer who had himself evidently witnessed something in the loch that he couldn't account for, was met not with silence, but a stream of denials.

The first local to voice concern was

TOP PHOTO / FORTAN PICTURE LIBRARY



ABOVE: A 1930s postcard showing a pleasure steamer on the loch. BELOW: The Spicers' sighting of an "abomination" crossing the road as reported by the *Daily Sketch*, 7 December 1933.

Captain John Macdonald, from the steamer company that ran daily cruises on the loch. The *Inverness Courier* published a letter on 12 May in which Macdonald suggested the couple had only seen "sporting salmon in lively mood". These, he explained from his own experience, could cause considerable turbulence on the surface of the otherwise dead calm waters. He added: "It is news for me to learn, as your correspondent states, that 'for generations the Loch has been credited with being the home of a fearsome monster'. I have sailed in Loch Ness for 50 years, and during that time I have made no fewer than 20,000 trips up and down Loch Ness. During that half century of almost daily intercourse with Loch Ness I have never seen such a 'monster' as described by your correspondent."

On 23 May, a paragraph appeared in the *Courier* stating that most people on and around the loch agreed with Macdonald that there was no monster: "Some think it is a big otter, others a huge eel, and others have ventured the opinion that the disturbance in the water is of a seismoscopic nature. Many, too, are of the opinion that Captain John Macdonald's views are correct."

In the following weeks, up to July, Alex Campbell supplied several sightings of the monster to the *Inverness Courier* – including eyewitness reports he sent in anonymously³ – and most were answered by some local's letter to the editor with a perfectly natural explanation for the reported observation.

With a brief exception (a letter to the *Courier*, 30 May, which recalled the alleged monster report in the seventh century *Life of St. Columba*) all of these letters offered not sightings, but "rational" explanations for the reports that Campbell was producing. In the *Northern Chronicle*, 21 June and 16 August, these included unlikely candidates such as a shark, a sailfish, and a sturgeon (which one F Sutherland claimed he had just spotted at Fort Augustus) – but nobody thought that the explanation for the stories was a monster.

THE MONSTER COMES ASHORE

But that was just a passing phase. In August, a sensational story reported by a visiting couple was published. It is – including the 1930 sighting – only the fourth or fifth observation of a "monster" in Loch Ness. The *Inverness Courier*, on 4 August 1933, printed a letter by Mr George Spicer from London, who had motored, with his wife, along the road from Dores to Foyers only shortly before when...

I saw the nearest approach to a dragon or pre-historic animal that I have ever seen in my life. It crossed my road about fifty yards ahead and appeared to be carrying a small lamb or animal of some kind.

It seemed to have a long neck which moved up and down in the manner of a scenic railway, and the body was fairly big, with a high back; but if there were any feet they must have been of the web kind, and as for a tail I cannot say, as it moved so rapidly, and when we got to the spot it had probably disappeared into the loch. Length from six feet to eight feet and very ugly.

I am wondering if you can give me any information about it, and am enclosing a stamped addressed envelope anticipating your

kind reply.

Whatever it is, and it may be a land and water animal, I think it should be destroyed, as I am not sure whether had I been quite so close to it I should have cared to tackle it. It is difficult to give you a better description, as it moved so swiftly, and the whole thing was so sudden. There is no doubt it exists.

Locals, for the most part, were still sceptical, and said so. The *Inverness Courier*, before printing the letter, stated laconically: "From Mr Spicer's description of the animal, one who knows the habits of otters, says he has no doubt but that the animal was a large otter and that it was carrying a young otter in its mouth."

However, the claim that there was a monster in the loch started to fascinate a readership beyond the local area, and the first journalists from Scotland and England started to cover events at Loch Ness. A "Mystery Fish in Scottish Loch" was briefly referred to in the Glasgow papers. For those intent on investigating the stories, Campbell and Spicer were the first ports of call for information.

Spicer changed his story after his initial report. To Constance Whyte he complained in 1957 that people had ridiculed him: "Reports were circulated that the Monster had been seen 'with a lamb in its mouth'; this and other distorted or incomplete accounts were common at the time and, much to the annoyance of Mr and Mrs Spicer, were frequently repeated afterwards."⁹

The Spicers started to enlarge the six to eight feet previously given. In an interview with Tim Dinsdale in 1960 they judged the length at 25ft (7.5 m); Nicholas Witchell, in the mid-1970s, was told it was 30ft (9 m).

If this report is not an outright hoax, a six-foot long dark animal crossing a road does sound very like an otter. To counter the otter identification, Spicer changed his story in each retelling, and then claimed it had been distorted by others. There has been much discussion in recent years as to whether Spicer's account was influenced by the screening of the movie *King Kong* (in the UK, the film opened on 17 April 1933; see FT323:54-55) which shows a brontosaurus, and this may be

DAILY SKETCH THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1933.—PAGE 3

Loch Ness Horror Seen On Land

Motorist Tells How an "Abomination" With a 3-Arched Neck and a Body 4-feet High Shot Across the Road

"PREHISTORIC SPECIES"

Following on the publication yesterday of the first snapshot of the monster seen in the waters of Loch Ness, the *Daily Sketch* can now give the story of a motorist who claims to have encountered it on land!

"It was horrible—an abomination," he says. "The first I saw of it was an undulating sort of neck, a little thicker than an elephant's trunk. It did not move in the usual reptilian fashion but with three arches in its neck it shot across the road until a ponderous body about 4 feet high came into view."

"I have motored thousands of miles. I am a temperate man. I cannot think of any undertaking, any plunge, that I would not accept to vouch for the truth of my statement. I am certain this creature is of a prehistoric species."

MYSTERY DEATH OF ENGLISHWOMAN

Husband Did Not Know She Was On Riviera

Investigations by the police into the death of a Miss Olive Smith of a woman who gave her name as Mary Wilson, aged 75, and who was thought to be an American, resulted in her being identified yesterday as Mrs. Olive Marie Kingston, a 36-year-old Englishwoman.

"I have not identified her yesterday. It is understood to have been the missing magnificence that he did not know that his wife had not been on the Riviera (says the British United Press), nor that they had been separated nearly years."

The death of Mrs. Kingston was discovered in strange circumstances, the body being found in a pool in the hotel, the

(P.M.) LATE LONDON EDITION

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Mr. G. Spicer.

Prisoner Executed in Error

"Great regret" is expressed by the Punjab Government in announcing the execution of a condemned prisoner in Lahore Central Jail on November 21 when crimes poisoning the execution had been issued on the previous day.

On application to the authorities, says Bester, an appeal was made filed in the Privy Council, and the Government directed postponement of the execution. The sentence had been carried out before the appeal was received.

LINDBERGH'S WIN GAMBLE WITH LIVES

Over South Atlantic With Fuel Minimum

Charles and Mrs. Lindbergh stated their lives yesterday in an attack on the South Atlantic crossing, with the bare minimum of fuel following one failure of their engine to rise with a full load—and almost.

Language and food, health, fuel, were mentioned before they took off from Haverhill, Ontario, to fly to Paris, Natal, Brazil, 1,000 miles away.

The flying couple were on the last lap of a flight which has taken them to Europe via the Arctic and back via Africa.

They have been carrying a possible Atlantic air route, Mrs. Lindbergh said as her husband's engine coughed.

On and Mrs. Lindbergh landed at Port Natal at 5 p.m. (O.M.T.) the second flight having taken nearly 18 hours.

Their attempt was the 18th, and the voyage apparently uneventful, for Mrs. Lindbergh said on arrival in Natal that the flight had been carried out in the most perfect manner.

They left Haverhill at 2 a.m. in brilliant moonlight, and had no trouble in reaching Natal, where they had arranged to meet some anti-aircraft and military forces.

After the Lindberghs passed over Parnassus, the British "Devil" Island, where some of the inmates were encouraged to them.



BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

ABOVE: The Spicers' encounter, complete with what Mr Spicer insisted was the erroneous detail of a lamb in the monster's mouth, in an illustration by Gino D'Achille.
BELOW: The first book about Nessie, 1934's *The Loch Ness Monster and Others* by RT Gould, featured detailed analyses of the Spicer, Grant and Campbell sightings.

the case; but the animal Spicer drew in 1933 looks quite unlike any dinosaur – at most, the outlines can be described as vague. The illustrations that show a dinosaur-like animal postdate the late 1950s. Whether invented or just boastfully exaggerated, the Spicers' sighting was enormously influential, and the second most famous land sighting, that of Arthur Grant, was obviously influenced by it.

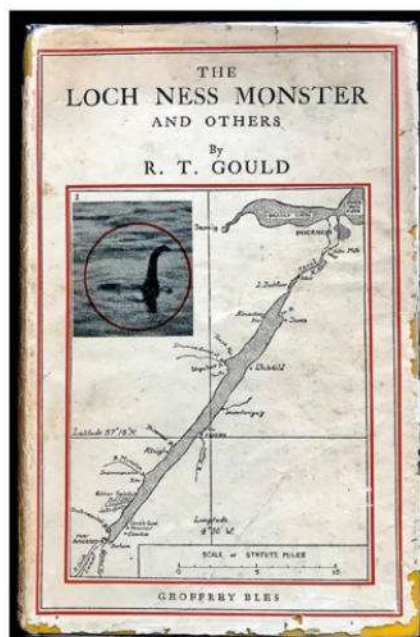
SIGHTINGS INCREASE

We must assume that not everybody at the newspaper was happy with the *Inverness Courier* giving Alex Campbell so much space. Under the title "The Loch Ness 'Monster'. True Story of His Life. Told to a Mere Woman" the paper printed an imaginary "interview with the monster" on 15 August 1933 (p.6):

'Pleased to meet you,' said Mr Otterserpentdragonplesiosaurus, waving one of his flail-like flippers. 'I have a soft side to the *Courier*, as it was the gentleman who writes to you from Fort Augustus who brought me out of my cavernous depths, and planted me right in the public eye. I see they know all about me in London now, so my fortune's made...I asked Mr O— very politely if he would give me some particulars about his life for the Press. 'Certainly,' said Mr O— with alacrity, for alike all the truly great he loves to bask in the sunshine of publicity.

This does not give the impression that the locals were superstitiously afraid of the

PEOPLE ACCEPTED THE IDEA THAT A SEA MONSTER HAD FOUND ITS WAY INTO THEIR LOCH

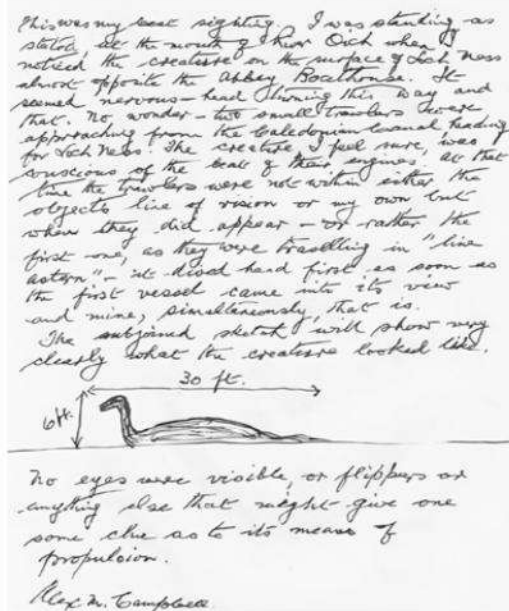


monster. The *Courier* certainly hints at a widespread belief that the monster had been "created" by Campbell.¹⁰ The interview led to a letter to the editor on 18 August (p.5), when a local pointed out that the creature was no plesiosaur, but an otter or turtle.

But by now it was too late to bury the monster story. English and international newspapers had carried the Spicers' report and tourists began to flock to the loch. Now it was foreign visitors who told their stories about meetings with the monster. The *Inverness Courier* printed them, and the number of sightings increased considerably. It would not be unreasonable to assume that due to the road improvements, drifting logs, oil drums, otters, swimming deer and boat wakes were mistaken for the monster by many who had come in the expectation of seeing it. In addition, during the whole autumn and winter of 1933/34, seals were present in the loch.¹¹

Now the local papers began to receive claims that the monster had been seen in previous years, but each time such claims were made the loch communities denied them. Loch Ness people slowly accepted the idea that some unusual sea monster had found its way into their loch, but they all knew it had not been there before April 1933.¹²

When a letter to the editor in the *Courier* claimed on 10 October that the monster had been known for 50 years, this prompted someone to write a confirmatory letter to the editor claiming that the nuns at Fort Augustus Abbey had been well aware of the crea-



ABOVE LEFT: The first Nessie photo, taken by Hugh Gray on 12 November 1933. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Alex Campbell's description and sketch of his sighting of a monster that "seemed to him to be fully 30 feet in length". **BELOW:** A picture from the *Dundee Courier* showing Commander RT Gould "on track of the monster" in November 1933.

ture for 50 years. The letter was published on 20 October 1933, and every local knew that it was a parody of such outlandish claims: the Abbey only housed monks, so the letter implied that such claims were untrue.

And finally, Alex Campbell had a sighting that he went public with: On 17 October 1933 *The Scotsman* reported that Campbell, "a man who up to that time had refused to believe in the existence in the loch of anything other than a seal or a large marine animal of some kind", had now spotted a far more sensational monster. "He stated that one afternoon a short time ago he saw a creature raise its head and body from the loch, pause, moving its head - a small head on a long neck - rapidly from side to side, apparently listening to the sound of two drifters from the Caledonian Canal, which was out of its sight, then take fright and sink into the water... the creature seemed to him to be fully 30 feet in length."¹³

Campbell also reported his observation to his employer, the Ness Fisheries Board. However, this version of his story is quite different. He now revealed that he had seen the same thing again a few days later, "but the light was improving all the time, and in a matter of seconds I discovered that what I took to be the Monster was nothing more than a few cormorants, and what seemed to be the head was a cormorant standing in the water and flapping its wings... The other cormorants, which were strung out in a line behind the leading bird, looked in the poor light and at first glance just like the body or humps of the monster."

Campbell's own sighting has pride of place in the first book ever written on the enigma, Rupert Gould's *The Loch Ness Monster* - as a typical example about how witnesses can be mistaken!¹⁴

Later, Campbell changed his story again and impressed many cryptozoologists with it. His sighting was originally dated to 7 Sep-

CAMPBELL'S OWN SIGHTING HAS PRIDE OF PLACE IN THE FIRST EVER BOOK ABOUT THE ENIGMA



tember (in the newspaper), became October 1933 (in Gould), and 22 September 1933 for Constance Whyte in 1957. When he spoke to Tim Dinsdale in 1960, he dated his observation to May 1934.¹⁵ The same date was recorded by Nicholas Witchell.¹⁶ Campbell never again mentioned cormorants.

In the summer of 1976, Campbell told *National Geographic* magazine that he had seen the monster on more than a dozen occasions. There is little doubt that Campbell was if not the inventor of the Monster then at least the engine that kept the saga rolling through 1933.

On the other hand, towards the end of 1933 the first witnesses began to share alleged pre-1933 encounters. Mrs MacDonald

recalled that she had seen a strange creature in February 1932 in the River Ness at Holme Mills (in the built-up area of Inverness). Different versions of her spectacular observation were published in many newspapers.¹⁷ The *Herald* as well as the *Times* wrongly dated the encounter to 1933, made the creature 12 to 15 feet long and wrote that it had tusks. However, Mrs MacDonald recalled a "crocodile", six to eight feet long, with a very short neck and long jaws with teeth, as she told the *Daily Mail* (29 Dec 1933) and Gould.¹⁸ This animal, with or without tusks, does not much resemble the classic long-necked Nessie.

On 12 November 1933 the first photo of Nessie was taken. The picture shows little more than a shapeless, at best tadpole-shaped, grey blotch on a slightly rippled surface without any indication of background scenery. No expert on the monster agrees with any other about what the image shows - a flipper, a fin, a back, a neck? As one can easily spot the waves through the monster, it is evident that the photographer, Hugh Gray, double exposed the plate, although he has his staunch supporters even today.

NESSIE GOES GLOBAL

With several sensational encounters, and now a photograph, the Loch Ness Monster emerged from its Scottish habitat and made a home in newspapers around the world. In October 1933 the first press reports appeared in Australia and New Zealand,¹⁹ and in non-English speaking countries in December.²⁰ Most of the English news stories opened with the Spicers' observation. The weight of the mounting evidence was said to have made even Captain MacDonald waver: "Captain John MacDonald, who, as skipper of the Loch Ness boat, has made the trip over the water more than 20,000 times in the last 35 years, has been the chief of the Inverness sceptics. When people have



BETTMANN / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Marmaduke Wetherell, sent by the *Daily Mail* to find the monster, photographed with his cameraman Gustave Pauli during their search of the loch.

spoken of the Loch Ness monster he has said, 'Merely salmon at play.' Now the weight of evidence has made Captain MacDonald less sure. When we saw him this morning he said: 'If so many reputable people say they have seen 'the beast' one inclines to the belief that there is something in it.'"²¹

Tourists flocked to the area. The loch was full of visitors in cars and on boats, one newspaper reported;²² there were even search-planes in the sky, and every visitor carried a camera in hopes of snapping the monster, said another.²³ In the House of Commons, a member suggested the loch should be investigated in the interest of science, but the "Secretary for Scotland, Sir Geoffrey Collins, would not agree that there was adequate reason to suspect the presence of 'any baneful monster' in the loch, and he thought further researches could properly be left to private enterprise and zealous press photographers."²⁴ The Fishery Board of Scotland was "urged, as a matter of scientific interest, to collect evidence from people who claim to have seen the creature and to endeavour to ascertain what it actually is."²⁵

On 9 December, the august London *Times* began daily coverage of all sightings of Nessie. England's most important newspaper did this without irony – seriously, neutrally, and according to the best journalistic principles. The monster had become respectable. Some 30 articles with contemporary eyewitness accounts had been published by

the *Inverness Courier* when 1933 neared its end, while other reports had found their way into the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph* as well as the *Times*. The monster continued to gain momentum, with roughly three times as many sightings reported in the local and national press in 1934.

Then, the now famous *Daily Mail* fiasco happened. In December, the paper sent the famous big game hunter Marmaduke Wetherell to Loch Ness. He interviewed witnesses, sailed on the loch and finally, after a long week, discovered proof of the monster's existence: footprints of the creature on the banks of the loch.

"Loch Ness Monster is a Fact, not a Legend" said the *Daily Mail* on 21 December 1933, and newspapers all over the world followed suit. One month later, the British Museum in London declared that an investigation of the footprints had shown that they all were of the right hind foot of a hippopotamus – and had been made with an umbrella stand. It has been claimed repeatedly that Wetherell himself was the hoaxer, but this has never been proven.²⁶

That Wetherell's tracks were hoaxed was not yet known when the next classic observation was reported by Arthur Grant. Grant's story was probably one of the most influential of all, being highly valued by Gould, Oudemans, Constance Whyte and practically all other researchers at the loch. It was the only time the whole body of the creature was fully

exposed out of the water and competently observed.

At 2am on 5 January 1934 Arthur Grant was driving along the road near Abriachan with a Moon so bright one could have read a newspaper by it. *The New York Times*²⁷ quotes Grant from the English papers:

It was about thirty or forty yards from the Glasgow-Inverness road that I observed in the moonlight on the other side of the road from the loch what appeared to be a large black object. The body was very hefty, and I distinctly saw two front flippers. There were two other flippers which seemed to be webbed behind, and there was a tail which I estimated to be five or six feet long. The curious thing about the tail was that it did not, as far as I could see, come to a point, but was rounded off. The total length of the creature would be fifteen to twenty feet. Knowing something about natural history. I can say I have never seen anything in my life like the creature I saw. It looked like a hybrid – something between a plesiosaurus and the seal tribe. I jumped off my cycle, but the creature, with great speed, had rushed into the loch, making a wild splash.

In an interview with the *Daily Mail*, Grant stressed that the monster's "long jaws could easily hold a lamb or goat."²⁸

The next day several students from Edinburgh investigated the site of the encounter. They found "[a]ccording to The *Daily*

Scotland Stirred by Mysterious Loch Ness Sea Monster



This is an artist's conception of what Arthur Grant saw early one morning as he drove down a road alongside Loch Ness, Scotland. Grant dismounted and started to investigate, but the strange animal snorted and plunged into the water.

LEFT: A contemporary artist's impression of Arthur Grant's encounter of 5 January 1934.

BELOW: A newspaper photo of Grant examining "hair found on the shores of Loch Ness".

monster had finally been given a definite shape that everybody could see in the photo. This would influence the way eyewitnesses perceived and interpreted boat's wakes, drifting logs, seals, otters and swimming deer.

INVENTING A TRADITION

Much of what is 'common knowledge' about the Loch Ness Monster is completely false, despite its continual repetition in the cryptozoological literature.

The monster was new and had not been reported "for centuries". In 1933, the people around Loch Ness agreed that

they had never before heard of a Loch Ness Monster.³² When several witnesses recollected pre-1930 observations, these were generally doubted or made fun of. Constance Whyte created the idea of a 'tradition' in 1957 with her book *More Than A Legend*. The highly positive review in the *Inverness Courier* (12 Apr 1957) says the book has just one fault – it claims a monster tradition. The monster was news in 1933, but it was also new.

Today, even people living around the loch believe in the monster tradition. When Gould wrote *The Loch Ness Monster* in 1934, he said that "whatever X [his name for Nessie] may be, there is little doubt that it originally made its way into Loch Ness from the sea."³³ To judge whether the eye witnesses had seen a real animal it was necessary to find out "whether a sea-creature could enter the Loch."³⁴ Gould accepted earlier observations (which had been reported in 1933) from 1871, 1903 and 1908,³⁵ but said that there was "nothing in the evidence to support the view that there is more than one creature."³⁶

In 1934, the Dutch champion of the sea-serpent, the zoologist Dr AC Oudemans, author of the classic *The Great Sea-Serpent* (1892), wrote his booklet, *The Loch Ness Animal*. In it he takes as fact that Nessie had entered Loch Ness only a short time before the sightings started, presumably in spring 1933. Oudemans knew Gould's book and the pre-1933 observations Gould had collected at the end of 1933, and wrote that "it is not for the first time that Loch Ness enjoys the honour of a visit of a sea-serpent... on all these occasions the visit of a sea-serpent was not of long duration; it left the Loch, probably the same way it entered it." Oudemans stressed that "Commander Gould presumes that



Wilson was close to Invermoriston when he spotted something unusual and was able to expose several photographs. One of these has become famous as the 'surgeon's photo'. Wilson refused to give any details about how he obtained the photos, and he never stated publicly that they showed Nessie. A 1994 investigation by David Martin and Alastair Boyd came to the conclusion that Wilson had photographed a model, and that the whole thing had been masterminded by Wetherell.

But the 'surgeon's photo' finally established the lasting idea of what Nessie looked like – the previous reports were of a mixed bag of whales and crocodiles, humps and tusks, long necks and big heads. Now the

Mail tracks of a three-toed creature... Ten footprints were identified along two tracks apparently formed by the passage of a large body through the undergrowth." And the *Los Angeles Times* added: "On the lake shore, the skull and bones of a mysteriously devoured goat were found."²⁹ The case was reported all over the world.³⁰

I suggested in 2004 that Grant's story could be a hoax, combining the Spicer account with the Wetherell tracks. This was confirmed by AG Harmsworth, who wrote that "Mr Grant had actually admitted [his sighting] as a joke to Mr Alex Menzies. He had apparently fallen off his motor bike and told his mother that the damage to the bike was caused by the monster making him crash."³¹ How far we can rely on such hearsay is, of course, difficult to assess. It should also be borne in mind that during the time of Grant's encounter seals were known to be in the loch. On 16 January 1934, the *Inverness Courier* reported that one had been spotted on 13 January in the River Ness, and one on 15 January at the opposite end of the loch, at Fort Augustus.

By 1934, sightings were occurring regularly. Generally, the monster was observed every other day, and by locals as well as tourists. Most of these reports are definitely the result of misperceptions (a many-humped monster was observed in a snow storm, its humps merging with one another; another humped monster followed a trawler without being noticed by the crew on board – both fine descriptions of a boat wake); they often lasted for several minutes, even hours. Sightings with such a long duration have never been repeated since and may well indicate drifting objects such as logs.

The next classic observation was made on 1 April 1934. London gynaecologist RK

the animal has entered the Loch, up the River Ness during a spate," which Oudemans thought must have been in March 1933. "It is of course possible... that someday it will try to escape."³⁷

That the Loch Ness monster is a recent introduction into the (real or imaginary) fauna of the loch was and still is common knowledge, although as new generations of locals will learn much from books, this fact will soon disappear.

In 1998, the *Inverness Courier* interviewed Father Andrew MacKillop, who had reached the ripe old age of 90 years, 78 of which he had spent on the banks of Loch Ness. He told the journalists that "the extraordinary thing is that there was no suspicion of it when I was a small boy [in the 1920s] until lots of people started seeing it in the early 1930s."³⁸ Richard Frere, a former believer in Nessie later turned sceptic, wrote about his 80 years at Loch Ness, "if local people knew of the strange beast between neolithic times and 1933, they kept it a closely guarded secret."³⁹ Even Henry Bauer, one of the most academic supporters of Nessie, admits that "nothing written before 1933... unequivocally refers to large nonmythical animals in Loch Ness."⁴⁰

It is interesting to note how much the early sightings of the beast differ: the Mackays saw something undefined, Mrs McDonnell a crocodile, the Spicers an otter-like something, Arthur Grant a kind of sea-lion; others reported dinosaurs like the ones in the 1933 movie *King Kong*, still others only large wakes. The Spicer and Grant land sightings are both highly suspect, but shaped the image of a long necked, humped, saurian monster, to which all later sightings adhered. If we had only the reports of 1933, we would not be able to construct an image of the monster, as the individual sightings are so very different from each other.

Ninety years ago, the Loch Ness saga was started by a single individual with a strong interest or belief in the phenomenon. It only gathered pace once others had been convinced, and only after the prototype of the long-necked sea-serpent had been superimposed on vague encounters, were others able to make detailed observations.

And yet – how wonderful it is! Show me just one sceptic who is able to drive along the loch without looking at least once in the hope that he or she will see the monster and find it, after all, to be fact rather than fiction. I certainly did, and I certainly hoped.

For more on the early years of the Loch Ness Monster, see also **FT308:42-46, 341:28-33**.

❖ **ULRICH MAGIN** is the author of numerous books on fortaean topics and is a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*. He lives in Germany and writes FT's Strange Continent column.



LEFT: By the end of 1933, Nessie was a household name. Here, a model of the monster is being taken by trailer to Olympia, London, for a Christmas show by the Bertram Mills Circus.

than 200 articles on the Loch Ness monster had been published in Australia by the end of the year. *Stratford Evening Post*, 25 Oct 1933.

20 In Germany in the *Badischer Beobachter* and the *Jeversches Wochenblatt*, 13 Dec 1933; in Austria in the *Pilsner Tagblatt*, 21 Dec 1933 and *Der Abend*, 28 Dec 1933; in Spain *La Vanguardia* and *ABC*, 21 Dec 1933.

21 *New Zealand Herald*, 9 Dec 1933, p.2.

22 *Pariser Tageblatt*, 27 Dec 1933, p.3.

23 *Deutsche Freiheit*, 6 Jan 1934.

24 *Poverty Bay Herald*, New Zealand, 14 Dec 1933, p.5.

25 *Manawatu Times*, New Zealand, 16 Dec 1933, p.9.

26 David Martin and Alastair Boyd: *Nessie – The Surgeon's Photograph Exposed*, Martin and Boyd, 1999.

27 *New York Times*, 6 Jan 1934, p.10.

28 Binns, p.81.

29 *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Feb 1934; cf. also Peter Costello, *In Search of Lake Monsters*, London: Garnstone Press, 1974, p.50. *Poverty Bay Herald*, 8 Feb 1934, did even better and linked the body of a drowned man found just below the encounter site with the monster!

30 "Although some newspapers scoff at the Loch Ness 'monster' stories, all publish a graphic narrative of how Arthur Grant, veterinary student, nearly ran over the 'monster' while motor-cycling at midnight in the moonlight," said the *New Zealand Horowhenua Chronicle*, 17 Jan 1934, p.5.

31 AG Harmsworth, Loch Ness Monster Eye-Witness Accounts: www.loch-ness.org/eyewitnesses.html; Ulrich Magin, "Die Genesis des Loch Ness-Monsters 1933–1934", *Bipedia* 22, Jan 2004, and *Investigating the Impossible*, Anomalist Books: Austin, Texas, 2011, pp.205–222.

32 This was first noticed by Binns in his pioneering study of the monster. See also my study on pre-1933 sightings in *Fortean Studies*, volume 7

33 Gould, p.65.

34 Gould, p.6.

35 Gould, p.25. One of these sightings is surely of an otter, others are very vague, none was reported in the newspapers at the time, which is quite surprising in some instances. For example, it was said in 1933 that a certain late Mr Roderick Matheson had seen the monster in the summer of 1885, but there was no article in the local papers, and yet he was "a first cousin of the late Dr Matheson... whose description and drawing of a weird sea creature [in Loch Alsh, 1893] are reproduced in Commander Gould's book, *The Case for the Sea Serpent*," as well as in most newspapers of 1893. *Glasgow Herald*, 19 Dec 1933, p.9. In another case, an earlier Loch Ness encounter had allegedly taken place in 1871, and in 1872 all Scottish newspapers reported on a Loch Hourm sea-serpent observation, but the Loch Ness witness did not report a sighting then.

36 Gould, p.34.

37 AC Oudemans, *The Loch Ness Animal*, Leyden: EJ Brill, 1934 pp.6, 8, 15.

38 *Inverness Courier*, 20 Mar 1998.

39 Richard Frere, *Loch Ness*, London: John Murray, 1988 p.167.

40 Henry H Bauer, *The Enigma of Loch Ness*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986, p.159.

NOTES

1 Mike Dash, *X-Phänomene*, Munich: Bettendorf, 1997, p.650; Paul Harrison, *The Encyclopaedia of the Loch Ness Monster*, London: Hale, 1999, p.126.

2 *Otago Daily Times*, 13 Jan 1934, p.18.

3 *Catholic Press* (Sydney, NSW), 17 Oct 1929, p.4.

4 *Otago Daily Times*, 27 Dec 1928, p.14.

5 *Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld.), 5 Sept 1930, p.4.

6 *Northern Chronicle*, 27 Aug 1930, p.5; *Inverness Courier*, 29 Aug 1930, p.5.

7 This report was also in the *Baltimore Sun* of 19 Oct 1930 under the title 'Weird Lake Monster Reported in Scotland', and, with the headline 'A "Taniwha"' in several New Zealand newspapers in 1931: *Waipa Post*, 25 June; *Bay of Plenty Times*, 1 July; *Manawatu Herald*, 18 July 1931.

8 Harrison, op. cit., p.39.

9 Constance White, *More Than A Legend*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957, p.79.

10 Ronald Binns, *The Loch Ness Mystery Solved*, Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1983, p.22.

11 *Northern Chronicle*, 6 Sept 1933, p.5; *Inverness Courier*, 6 Jan 1934, p.4 & 5.

12 *Inverness Courier*, 3 Oct 1933, p.5.

13 Binns, p. 76–77.

14 Rupert T Gould, *Loch Ness Monster*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1934, pp.110–112.

15 Tim Dinsdale, *Loch Ness Monster*, 4th Edition, London: RKP, 1982, p.97.

16 Nicholas Witchell, *The Loch Ness Story*, Lavenham: Terence Dalton, 1976, p.80.

17 *Glasgow Herald*, 13 Dec 1933, *Inverness Courier*, 12 Jan 1934, p.5, and 13 Sept 1935, p.5, *London Times*, 15 Dec 1933, p.14.

18 Gould, pp.38–39.

19 *The Sun* (Sydney, NSW), 19 Oct 1933, p.16. More

MEETING HENRY LINCOLN

In a previously unpublished interview, **GORDON RUTTER** talks to the late Henry Lincoln, co-author of the bestselling *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, about how he brought the mystery of Rennes-le-Château to the attention of the English-speaking world with a 1972 BBC documentary.

One summer's day in 2002 I found myself in the garden of Henry Lincoln's house (with him in attendance, I should add, in case you imagine me to be some kind of stalker), where we sat and chatted about Rennes-le-Château, and a few other subjects besides.

I had met Henry several times before at conferences organised by the Saunière Society and when I contacted him asking for an interview he was more than happy to oblige. Parts of the interview, relating to his work on *Doctor Who*, have appeared before, but the more forteen material has not.

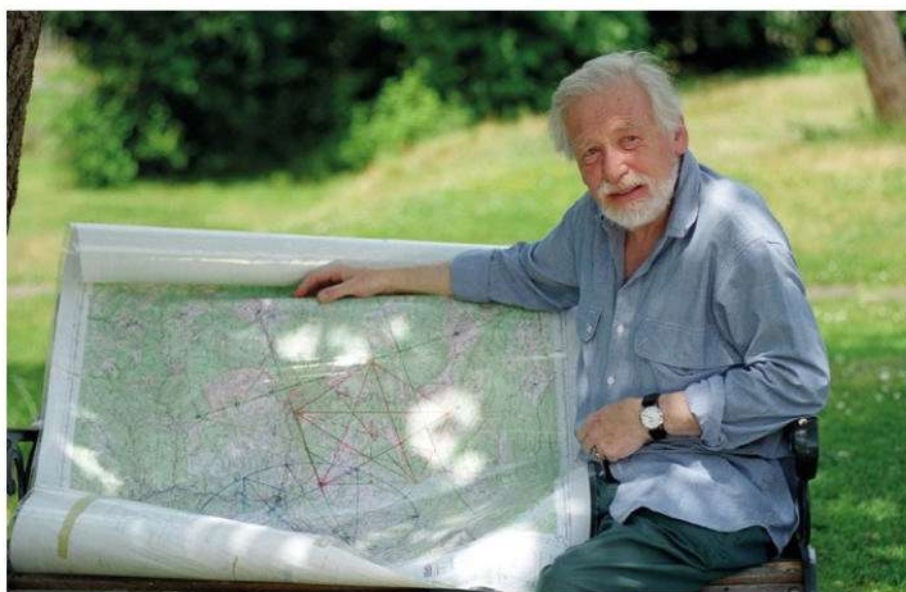
A HIDDEN MESSAGE

By any measure of success, the late Henry Lincoln achieved a great deal during his life – including careers as a successful actor and an accomplished scriptwriter – but to forteans he will always be the man who brought the mystery of Rennes le Château and its treasure to the English-speaking world.

Born Henry Soskin in 1930, he did his national service in the late 1940s in the Middle East, where he joined a theatre group. When he left the Army, he continued as an actor, and was often to be found doodling away in rehearsals in self-taught hieroglyphics. His interest in Egyptology soon became known and when playing an Arabic villain on one ATV programme he was asked to check the script for authenticity. He reported that it was somewhat lacking, and was asked to rewrite it. This he did, with enormous success, and was soon spending more time writing than acting. His roles included appearances in *The Champions*, *Man in a Suitcase*, *The Avengers*, *Coronation Street* and *Z Cars* (58 roles, according to IMDB). His writing credits included *Doctor Who* and the Boris Karloff/Christopher Lee film *The Curse of the Crimson Altar*, along with regular work on *Emergency Ward 10* and various documentaries.

In 1969, on a family holiday to Monserat, Lincoln came across the 1967 book *L'Or de Rennes* (later republished as *Le Trésor Maudit* or "The Accursed Treasure") by Gérard de Sède. The tale of a French country priest and his mysterious newfound wealth gripped Lincoln, particularly when he noticed something that others had missed...

"I saw this hidden message, which now



ROB COUSINS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

everybody can see because it's terribly simple; but when you don't know it's there... The fact that I saw it made me realise that de Sède must have seen it too, because you couldn't write the book without examining the thing carefully. As a writer, that intrigued me, and when I began to research it, it was an interesting story."

This discovery related to one of the parchments supposedly discovered in a pillar by the priest of Rennes-Le-Chateau, Bérenger Saunière, while carrying out renovations to the church.

"The content demonstrates a brilliantly concealed geometric design. I don't care whether it was de Chérisey who concocted it [Philippe de Chérisey was the probable author/faker of the 'Priory of Sion' documents that gave a supposed history of the treasure], it was the first step that led down the trail of discovery. It has a validity for that reason. The fact that the documents may have been concocted in 1956 by de Chérisey, as some people insist, doesn't alter that fact at all. It happens to be that that was the line that I followed, purely by accident. I didn't know what I was going to find – the discovery of the pentagon in the parchment, which made me aware of the significance of the geometric shape, although I didn't know

it at the time.

"I suppose it was fortuitous too that I knew Paul Johnstone who was the producer of *Chronicle* [a BBC series on popular archaeology which ran from 1966 to 1991]. And so I just called Paul up as a friend and said, look, I've got an idea for a documentary; can we talk about it? And Paul said, OK, fine, let's go to Paris and talk to de Sède, and away it all went. I don't think I was particularly interested in trying to make a career out of that sort of thing. It just happened. We were halfway through making that film when the Poussin thing came up."

THE POUSSIN THING

The "Poussin thing" refers to the painter Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665). One painting in particular became important to the Rennes le Château story: *Et in Arcadia Ego* (also known as *Les bergers de Arcadie*), painted 1637-1638 and showing a group of shepherds surrounding a tomb. When Professor Christopher Conford of the Royal College of Art, an expert in the geometrical analysis of paintings, pointed out that the figures formed a pentagon, Henry realised this related to what he'd seen in the parchment.

"I went, ah, I don't believe it! I've seen that before; and that's when, with hindsight,



ABOVE: Poussin's *Et In Arcadia Ego*, for Henry Lincoln a key to the mystery. BELOW: The Magdala Tower built by the priest Bérenger Saunière with his mysterious riches.

the parchment became relevant. And then Christopher said, look at the landscape..."

The landscape depicted in *Et In Arcadia Ego* supposedly matches a landscape in the vicinity of Rennes-le-Château, even down to the presence of a similar-looking tomb. The tomb is now gone, dynamited by the owner of the land on 9 April 1988 because he was sick of treasure hunters trespassing on his property.

"It wasn't my idea, it was Christopher's, and there it was. So there is no denying the logic of that trail of evidence, so to jump up and down and say the parchments are fakes and the Saunière story is rubbish, therefore everything that follows from it is rubbish – that I think, in logic, is an undistributed middle isn't it?"

For those who aren't familiar with the story, the Rennes le Château 'treasure' is not just the supposed source of Bérenger Saunière's mysterious wealth, but partly the secret knowledge, supposedly known and preserved by the mysterious secret society of the 'Priory of Sion', that Christ survived the crucifixion and went on to marry Mary Magdalene; they had children whose descendants eventually ended up in southern France and formed the royal Merovingian dynasty, some of whom are still alive today. In this theory, the Holy Grail is simultaneously the womb of Mary Magdalene and the subsequent sacred royal bloodline she started.

**"I DON'T TAKE MYSELF
SERIOUSLY, BUT I TAKE
THE WORK SERIOUSLY, IT
SHOULD BE IMPECCABLE"**



Henry continued talking about the impact of the discovery of the painting with the pentagon.

"De Sède said, here's this tomb. And it was Paul who said, look, stop it, we'll pull everything. Because it was originally just going to be a 20-minute film. Paul said, right, this merits a full-length programme, go ahead and do it. And that's how the first one ["The Lost Treasure of Jerusalem"] got made. It went out on 12 February 1972 and it was at the height of the power cuts, so the plugs got pulled halfway through the programme and the whole country more or less went through the roof. The BBC thought, that's a hell of a reaction to a programme, so they repeated it six weeks later, which was unusual; but obviously it had a great appeal. I was lucky – I had a good subject.

"Ever since then I've been doing documentaries. Somebody asked me years ago to do a fictionalised version of the Saunière story, sort of dramatise it and make a film. And I thought, it's a jolly idea, but I've got enough trouble with the subject as it is. It's too easy for people to say, who the hell does he think he is? A science fiction *Doctor Who* writer – what does he know about mathematics and geometry and ancient history and all the demonstrable and provable things I keep uncovering, which the professional academics ought to be doing. So I don't think I'd play that particular game of fictionalising the story. I have to treat it

with a certain degree of respect. I take the story seriously; I don't take myself seriously, but I do take the work seriously. And the scholarship should be impeccable. There should be no arguments. I now restrict myself to that which is demonstrable and provable."

Every talk I have ever heard Henry give he has trotted out his mantra: "Don't believe what I say just because I say it."

In 2002, as we were talking, neither Henry nor I knew that American author Dan Brown was going down this very route of fictionalising the Rennes le Château story: his bestselling novel *The Da Vinci Code* (see FT193:32-37) would not be published until April of the following year.

I asked Henry if he had been interested in mysteries prior to his discovery of the Rennes le Château book or had just been something to while away a few hours in an airport?

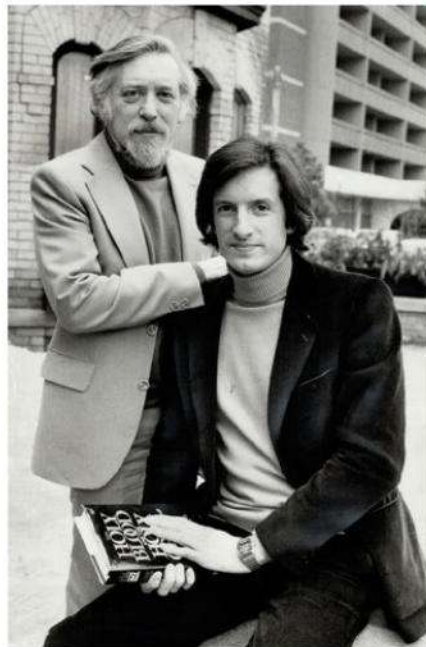
"It was that. I wasn't particularly interested in mysteries in that sense other than as a writer of drama. I was writing quite a lot of them. I was really cooking up science fiction stories for *Doctor Who*, or thrillers for *Softly, Softly* or whatever. I was a creator of plots and when I stumbled on this real-life mystery... as I said earlier, it was a hidden message that was simple enough to understand if you know that it was there and where to look. But there were a number of people who spent months before I published it, knowing there was something hidden but not seeing it."

After the broadcast and popularity of the first documentary a follow-up was inevitable.

"It had a great appeal to the general public and that's why Paul said, you'll have to do another one eventually. And I carried on researching it. But of course the second one didn't happen just because I was researching it. The second one happened because somebody conned a producer at the BBC into believing that he'd found the treasure; so they tried to make the film without me because there was this particular director who was anxious to make a Rennes-le-Château film without me so that he could get the credit for it himself. He had to eat a fair degree of humble pie because I had to go and get him out of that hole and it was obvious that the man had found nothing of the sort – and so they were stuck with the commitment to making a film with no script. And I already had the script in my head. Well, I told the story in my book and it's quite funny really. So that's how the second one came to get made."

This second film, called "The Priest, the Painter and the Devil", went out on 30 October 1974. The last of Lincoln's three Rennes-le-Château *Chronicle* films, "The Shadow of the Templars", was broadcast on 17 November 1979.

"WE'VE GOT ENOUGH SOLID FACTS WITHOUT BRINGING IN NONSENSE FROM OUTER SPACE"



FROM SCREEN TO PAGE

After the success of the *Chronicle* documentaries, Henry co-wrote *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, setting out his ideas and research. It was first published in 1982. Was the book inevitable?

"No. I'm a script writer, not a book writer. I've become a book writer. But back then I was a script writer. I think visually, I write film – and I don't like writing prose."

He did, though, write a four or five-page article for a book looking at 10 years of *Chronicle*; had that started the thought processes that led to the idea of a book?

"It was a mammoth subject that was getting out of control. It was too much work for one man. So that's how I became involved with Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh. Leigh was a writer of books, that's why I'm sure you've noticed the prose style in the first two books [*Holy Blood* and *The Messianic Legacy*] is quite

different from the prose style in the ones I started writing myself.

"Richard Leigh doesn't like travelling. You might find it hard to believe, but he's never been to Rennes le Château. He's never been! He won't travel, he won't go anywhere. So he would sit in his flat in Belsize Park or wherever it was and Baigent would come with me and we would travel around France.

LEFT: Henry Lincoln (left) and Michael Baigent publicising *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*.

He'd photograph places, because that was his job. He was a professional photographer. He can't speak French, so I used to interview people. And I took him to Rennes-le-Château and we got photographs of all that. And then we'd feed the material back to Richard, who'd sit at home and draft the prose and I would then edit it. But Richard always wanted to say that the prose was his. So everything I wrote eventually got filtered through Richard's prose... and you can see he will never use one word where 50 will do! I use simple, plain, direct prose and I write simply.

"It was very successful, and people think that as a result I must be a multi-millionaire. Which in itself is quite funny, because they don't stop to realise that it was three authors, so the money was divided between three – less 10 per cent to our agent and 15 per cent for overseas sales. So, yes if I had been the sole author I would probably be... I don't think a multi-millionaire, but quite rich."

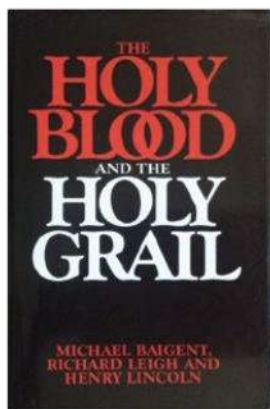
The Tomb of God – a book about Rennes-le-Château by Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger – had been published in 1996 and part of the publicity for it claimed that the authors had been paid a £300,000 advance. I asked Henry if this sort of sum stuck in his throat after the relatively meagre amounts he had received.

"I find it quite funny; it just goes to show that if you write rubbish you can make an awful lot of money. I could have sensationalised this. I could have done a von Däniken on it very easily, but it just ain't my way. But the money has not been relevant to this story as far as I'm concerned. I've done it because it fascinates me, because it's a valid piece of research and because the discoveries we've made over the years are valid and important; and that's why I continued with it. Certainly not to do with money. Because I have not made vast sums out of it. I've just made a reasonable living. After all I'm in my eighth decade – I should be living without having to worry too much about where the next farthing is coming from. But I've never been paid anything like, if you're right, a third of a million pounds. Not ever. But there you go."

THE LUNATIC FRINGE

Henry was well aware that a lot of people who followed his ideas tended to take them to extremes.

"The story does inevitably attract the lunatic fringe. What slightly irritates me is that people of that ilk read my material, interpret it in their own way and then think that's the way that I look at it; and then they get quite angry when I don't. A lot of English lunatics have descended on Rennes-le-Château; not just English lunatics, but Americans too, buying bits of land down there. A lot of the lunatic fringe have gone down there. I was accosted by





DOUGLAS O'CONNOR / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Henry Lincoln speaking to a visiting enthusiast in Rennes-le-Château in 2008.

a group that had established themselves there and wanted me to go and sort of play with them and then they started to tell me their approach to it. They were most put out when I said I would have absolutely nothing to do with what, as far as I could see, was unmitigated rubbish. Pure fantasy and wishful thinking. You must present me with evidence. Solid facts. We've got enough solid facts without dressing it up with nonsense from outer space or whatever.

"It's all very well to make these discoveries, we now need to understand them. And that I do not. There are so many people who call themselves experts – Rennes le Château experts – but there aren't any. I think I probably know more about it than anybody, and I am not an expert. I have amassed a certain number of facts and I have created one hypothesis, which upset some people who seem to think I've made it as a statement of fact. You claim that Jesus didn't die on the cross, and so on and so on. I don't claim anything of the sort. If they read the book properly they'll see that's an hypothesis. And also it doesn't matter a damn whether it's likely or unlikely or whether I believe it or not. What matters is that someone in the past did believe it and acted accordingly. That is why it must be considered seriously. People say to me: do you believe in God? I neither believe or disbelieve anything. I either know or I don't know. And if I don't know, I say so."

As a high-profile author on esoteric mysteries Henry had run-ins with some strange characters.

"I've been reminded to ask you not to say where we are – there are too many bloody lunatics trying to get to me. I'm happy for it to be said that I inhabit the Cotswolds, but that's about as close as one can get. I have had lunatics who've got me up – they appear at the door. I've had people who have got my number, and on one occasion I was telephoned at about 8.30 when I had six dinner guests and this bloody maniac expecting me to give him, this disembodied voice, a symposium on the phone about Rennes-le-Château! So, yes, there are a lot of nuts who would like to get at me.

"I got this letter. This was a woman in Paris, Princess somebody or other it said on her letter heading – it was all some terrible mystery – who was asking about the Priory of Sion and Pierre Plantard [former Grand Master of the Priory of Sion and guardian of the Royal Bloodline – allegedly]. And she has discovered who she is. It's all to do with twins. And she was Ava Gardner's daughter and I think Fred Astaire was her father. Al Capone was part of it, and it was totally, totally wild. And I thought I really, in a way, want to meet this woman. Obviously, that's the last thing you want to do.

"I had one day through the letterbox a copy of the *Readers Digest*, all sealed up in its plastic thing and addressed to me. And

I thought, I don't subscribe to the bloody *Readers Digest* and I looked at this rather carefully and I realised it had been slit open and resealed. I thought, this is a bit fishy, so I slit the Sellotape off and inside this *Readers Digest* was a letter from this woman who had some information which she wished to impart to me and it was extremely urgent and would I meet with her at the back entrance to the library, I think in Slough, and bring with me something like a passport to prove I was Henry Lincoln. This letter was on her solicitors' headed paper and I had to reply saying, would you please tell your client I will not meet with her in the back entrance of the bloody library! Bloody lunatics!"

And Henry had something to say about *Fortean Times*. "Oh, great. Well, yes, that's full of all sort of mad facts, except that a great preponderance of the 'facts', in inverted commas, are hearsay. And that's where I get extremely cautious."

A few years after our interview, Henry moved to Rennes-le-Château, where he gave private tours to visiting groups and battled against the local mayor. He died there on 24 February 2022, aged 92 (see FT420:26 for a full obituary).

❖ **GORDON RUTTER** is a founder of the Edinburgh Fortean Society and head of the Charles Fort Institute. He is a regular contributor to *Fortean Times*.

THEY KNOW THE UNKNOWN

CELEBRITY ACCOUNTS OF EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Parapsychologist **DR CALLUM E COOPER** spent lockdown devouring celebrity autobiographies and watching telly – perhaps not the usual places to find accounts of anomalous experiences and after-death communications, but they nonetheless yielded lessons about the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary...

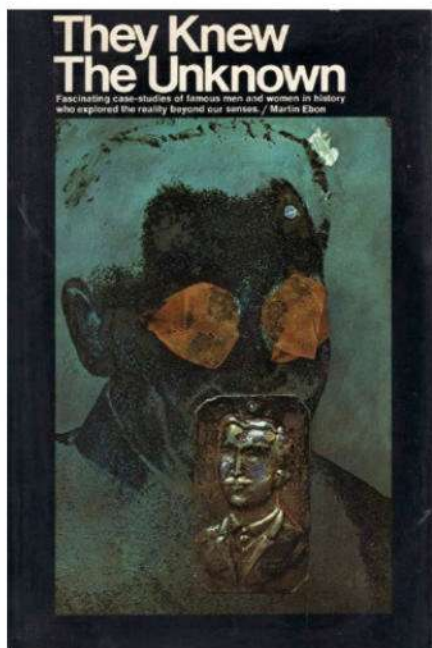
In some of my early writing on telephone anomalies (see “Phone calls from the Dead”, **FT405:30-35**), I stumbled across the book *They Knew The Unknown* by Martin Ebon,¹ who produced many popular works on psychic phenomena. This particular book focused on well-known public figures – typically scientists – and their links to psychical research. My main interest was Ebon’s coverage of Thomas Edison and his interests in Spiritualism and contact with the dead (see **FT363:30-37**), but it also provided insights into many other figures and their links to the field, including Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Abraham Lincoln and Charles Dickens.

When the Covid-19 lockdown began, my reading tended to biographies of figures of interest to me throughout my life. This included parapsychologists, of course – I worked my way through the life of JB Rhine in Denis Brian’s *The Enchanted Voyager*² and read the personal memoirs of Walter Franklin Prince³ – but also actors and singers who have, in some way, struck a chord with me over the years. What jumped out at me was that in each of these autobiographies there was at least some mention of significant anomalous experiences of clear interest to parapsychology. Here, I’ll share just a few of those accounts.

TALK SHOW GHOSTS

Before I read these life stories, I’d also come across a few television interviews that produced examples of exceptional experiences that stood out for me. The first was with the singer Sting (Gordon Sumner). In 2009, the *Daily Mail* and many other news outlets carried reports of Sting’s ‘ghost confession’. Sting later discussed this in numerous interviews, such as one on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* in 2019 in which he talked about encounters in his purportedly haunted home in north London (where many of his songs were written). He stated to Fallon: “I never believed in ghosts. I was very sceptical, until I lived with them.” Cue nervous laughter from the audience. Fallon asked: “Was it numerous ghosts?” Sting replied:

“I LIKED THE GHOSTS. I ENJOYED THEIR COMPANY. BUT I WAS SCEPTICAL ABOUT IT”



“Yeah, you would wake up in the morning and everything had been reorganised in the kitchen, furniture was in a different place, bottles were smashed, plates were smashed on the floor. And one night I woke up and I saw Trudie [his wife] standing in the corner with our child. And I was wondering why she was staring at me, and then I reached over and there was Trudie [indicating the bed next to him]. She went ‘Who’s that?’ [pointing to the woman in the corner]. And we both saw this woman and a child in the corner of the room. Then

LEFT: Martin Ebon’s 1971 book examined public figures with links to psychical research. BELOW: Sting discusses his haunted north London home on a 2019 edition of *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

we found out that it used to be a pub called The Three Ducks, in the 17th century, and I don’t know what happened there, but it was a very weird atmosphere. Then when I sold the house, it kept being resold every few months. I liked the ghosts. I enjoyed their company. But I was very sceptical about it.” Host and audience greeted all this with nervous laughter, although they appeared respectful of Sting’s revelations. Fallon related having been in buildings with spooky atmospheres or reputations and creating a calm mindset by saying out loud to any putative ghosts: “Hey I’m cool, I’m good with you guys, you can do whatever. Haunt me. Have fun, it’s your place. Right?”

Singer Ed Sheeran offered a similar account on the *Jonathan Ross Show* in 2017, while sitting with guests singer Rita Ora and chef Gordon Ramsey. Although Ross is known for being a comic interviewer, he has some sympathy for accounts of exceptional experiences, possibly due to his wife Jane Goldman’s involvement with works such as *The Woman in Black* and with parapsychological phenomena on *Jane Goldman Investigates* (2003), which saw her interview prominent figures in the field such as the

late Maurice Grosse and the very much alive Dr Ciaran O’Keeffe. The conversation started with Ross mentioning that Ora helped Sheeran purchase her old home, before turning to Sheeran and saying: “But you think it’s haunted, don’t you?” Sheeran explained: “Ah, I do





ABOVE: BeeGee Sir Barry Gibb appears to have been visited by his departed brother Andy on numerous occasions, as in this 1989 clipping from the *The Sun*. BELOW: Ed Sheeran shares his ghostly experiences with fellow guests Rita Ora and Gordon Ramsey on *The Jonathan Ross Show* in 2017.

have a haunted house, I have a cottage, and there is a little girl that lives in the attic." There were nervous smiles from Ora and Ramsey, and some titters from the audience, but Sheeran remained straight-faced and adamant in his account. He continued: "Three people have stayed there that don't believe in ghosts and they've all seen it."

"So what do they see," asked Ross. "Do they see her walking around?"

Sheeran responded: "Yeah, they sleep in the top room and they wake up with her at the end of the bed, and there's... basically, the top room has a trapdoor in it, where in the 16th century people went there when they were ill and then they would die and get lowered down. And the girl that used to clean the room refuses to clean it, because she's seen the girl so many times." "So she's seen the ghost," said Ross. "Have you seen the ghost?"

Sheeran's final comment was: "Ah no, I'm not sleeping up there, f**k that man!" Which, naturally, gave rise to laughter from the audience and guests; but Sheeran appeared to be relating a genuine experience with some sincerity, not using it as an opportunity for humour.

Finally, given my own research into after-death communication (ADC) experiences, I was struck by the mention of such an experience by Sir Barry Gibb, the eldest brother in the Bee Gees. In 2021, in several newspapers and radio platforms worldwide, Sir Barry and his wife Linda reported that they had seen Andy Gibb (died 1988, seen by Linda) and Robin Gibb (died 2012, seen by Sir Barry) following their deaths. In *The Sun* newspaper,

Sir Barry is quoted as saying: "Maybe it's a memory producing itself outside your conscious mind or maybe it's real? The biggest question of all is, 'is there life after death?' I'd like to know." In an interview with Piers Morgan on the show *Life Stories* on ITV in 2017, Sir Barry revealed: "I saw Robin in my house in Miami walk across from the front door to the bar and I went to look and there was nobody there... Maybe it's in your own head but it was Robin. [It was a] nice experience, it wasn't scary it was just 'Ooh there's

Rob'." Although brief, this is a great example of how the ADC is predominantly a positive and therapeutic experience, no matter who it happens to and no matter what their beliefs or background.

ANOMALOUS AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

The first autobiography I read during the 2020 lockdown was not one in which I expected to find overlaps with the kind of exceptional experiences that interest me: comedian Julian Clary's humorously-titled memoir *A Young Man's Passage* (2005).⁴ Following the loss of his partner Christopher, Julian reported numerous ADC-type experiences. "I had a 'real' communication with Christopher some years after he died. I was depressed, stoned and listening to Dionne Warwick's recording of 'Heartbreaker'. I was missing him and felt that he was missing me. I thought I heard him calling me, forlorn and desperate for my physical presence. It wasn't as if he was just in another room or another town, he was in another world, behind glass, through the mirror. I only mention it because it was one of several such experiences I had for a few years. They have always been quite distressing because try as I might I couldn't comfort or reassure him."

It seems, despite the frustration Clary felt, that he obtained some comfort from the feeling and belief that Christopher had continued beyond death. Owing to this, Clary later attended a psychic demonstration. However, he recounts a "regrettable" experience and felt the whole thing was almost certainly a con on the basis of several concerns – hands brushing his face in the dark, singing to distract him from things happening around the room, the medium doing a poor impression of Christopher, and the likelihood that the medium and assistants had been listening into the sitters' conversations about personal loss before they began.

In his recent autobiography, *Windswept &*



BRIAN J RITCHIE / HOTSauce / SHUTTERSTOCK

The Sunday Times Bestseller

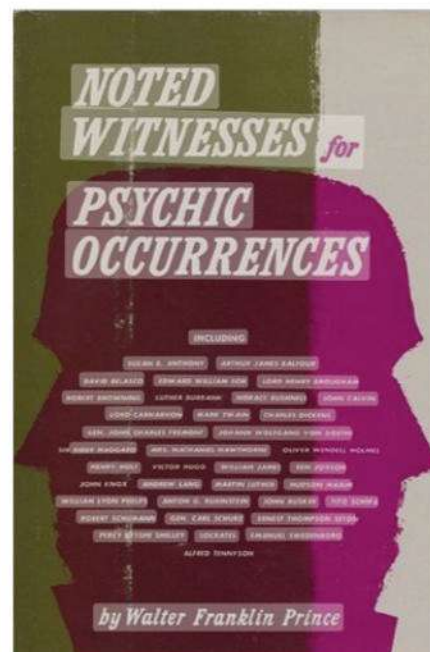
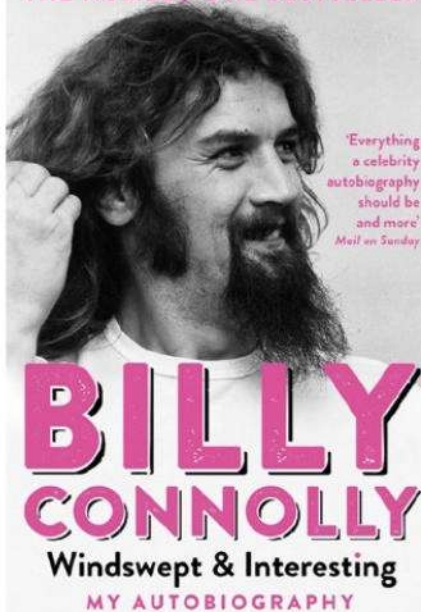
JULIAN CLARY



A YOUNG MAN'S PASSAGE

'Upliftingly hilarious' Paul Merton

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER



ABOVE LEFT & CENTRE: The autobiographies of Julian Clary and Billy Connolly both describe anomalous experiences. ABOVE RIGHT: Clary and Connolly might not have impressed parapsychologist Walter Franklin Prince (pictured below) as sufficiently upstanding to qualify as *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences* in his 1928 book, but their stories demonstrate Prince's point that exceptional experiences happen to all sorts of people, from all walks of life, not just the ill-educated or credulous.

Interesting (2021) Sir Billy Connolly makes it very clear that he has never been much of a believer in ghosts or psychics.⁵ During the Covid-19 pandemic, he ended up watching a lot of cable ghost-hunting shows.

"I'm not a believer, but I find them riveting," he writes. "The search for the entity is always disappointing, but I live in hope. I keep waiting for a ghost to appear; I wish someone would come in the door with no head, or there would be a visitation by a 'Lady in White' or 'Lady in Grey' – they always gave them names like that, to make them sound elegant."

However, Sir Billy does recount one night, during a stand-up comedy tour, where he did encounter something unusual. That night, in Dublin, he decided to take a walk through the corridors of the theatre and backstage. His stage manager Steve would normally be there to check the audience as they filled the theatre and announce Sir Billy as he made his entrance. On this particular night, Steve wasn't there. Connolly explains: "Instead of Steve, there was a man sitting at a desk right beside the stage. He was a dapper wee guy, with short hair and a moustache. I said, 'How are you doing?' He said, 'Fine, I don't always come in.' I said, 'Oh, aye? Fair enough.' Then I said, 'How is it out there?' Meaning the auditorium. 'Is it full yet?' And he said, 'It's fine.' So I said, 'Great, I'll go on.'" He went on only to find the auditorium two-thirds full with people still making their way to their seats. Instead of starting his act, he noticed a commotion in the audience between two men arguing over tickets and seating (a story in itself). He continues: "I sorted it out, but when I went backstage again the wee guy at the desk had gone. He was nowhere to be seen. I asked about him, and someone

"HE'S JUST ONE OF THE GAITY THEATRE GHOSTS. THERE ARE SEVERAL OF THEM!"



said, 'Oh, he doesn't actually exist. He's just one of the Gaiety Theatre Ghosts. There are several of them!'"

Sir Billy also reports an unusual death-bed experience involving his birth mother. She had left when he was very young, later establishing a new family and having more children, but Connolly had reconnected with his mother in adult life and developed a new relationship with her. He writes: "I heard through my cousin Neil that my mother was gravely ill with motor neurone disease. I had a strong urge to go to see her. I drove to Du-noon and arrived at three in the afternoon – I saw the time on the town clock – but then I felt overwhelmed with conflicting feelings and indecision. What would be the point of seeing her? What would I say to her? Would she even want to see me? Maybe her family wouldn't like my showing up... In the end I just couldn't face seeing her, so I turned round and went right back to Glasgow. Later, I was told that at that exact time, three o'clock, she'd said to her daughter Mary: 'Billy's here.'"

My most recent delve into someone else's life journey was the autobiography of rock legend Ozzy Osbourne.⁶ The book is intensely honest about drugs (to the extreme!), marriage breakdowns and all kinds of wild behaviour. It's the sort of stuff that writers could only dream of coming up with for a bestselling novel, but for Ozzy, it all happened. The fact that he is still alive, given what he has gone through, has shocked plenty of people, especially those in the medical profession who have dealt with him. His own accounts of exceptional experiences, remarkably, don't come from his wild, drug-fuelled years, but from the late 1990s when he was actively trying to become com-



LEFT: Walking medical miracle Ozzy Osbourne publicising his autobiography: "I swear that being sober has made me a bit psychic." **BELOW:** Benjamin Zephaniah was another of Jonathan Ross's guest with an unexpectedly odd experience to share.

pletely clean of drugs and alcohol, spurred on by his family. He reports two phenomena in the process of becoming clean. Firstly, thinking about people neither seen nor mentioned for a long time who, soon after, came back into his life (very much akin to telephone telepathy and similar phenomena discussed by Dr Rupert Sheldrake), and secondly, premonitions. Ozzy states in his own words: "I swear that being sober has made me a bit psychic, too. I'll say to Sharon [his wife], 'I wonder how so-and-so is' – someone I haven't seen for years – and the next day he'll pop out of the woodwork. I had something similar when Princess Diana died, y'know. The week before the crash, I had a dream about it. It was so vivid I told Tony Dennis [his personal assistant] about it. Then, a few days later, she was gone. 'Don't have any fucking dreams about me' Tony said."

POSTSCRIPT

I was going to end this article with Ozzy's account. However, while I was watching the Jonathan Ross show again (29 October 2022), another guest, the poet Benjamin Zephaniah, who comes across as an extremely level-headed man, unexpectedly shared an anomalous experience with viewers. Following a discussion about attitudes towards Hallowe'en, Ross, already primed with information on his guests, asked Zephaniah: "Am I right in

thinking that you had a sort of supernatural experience once?"

Drifting off into his recollections, Zephaniah replied: "Yes, I had a very, very weird experience, and interestingly, you know, a lot of these experiences happen in the night when there's shadows and stuff like that, but this happened in broad daylight. Me and five other people were in a house in Birmingham. We were waiting for a cousin to come home. She walked in the front door, through the front room, and out the back door. And we went to see her, and she wasn't there. And we all saw her.

Later on that day, we found out that she'd been hit by a car, died for about five minutes or whatever it is, and came back to life." The other guests looked stunned, and Ross let out a 'wow'. "And it wasn't just me, like I said there were five others who witnessed it," Zephaniah continued. "And I'm not really one of those people that believes in that stuff. I'm into science you know, but I also understand that there is stuff that we can't prove."

CONCLUSION

Clearly, people in the public eye, just like the rest of us, have brushes with the unknown. I wasn't looking for these anomalous experiences in the lives of people I happened to see being

interviewed or whose life stories I read, but they jumped off the page (or screen) at me. If anything, the sharing of such experiences and beliefs about psychical phenomena demonstrates just how common they are, no matter what the possible explanations for the specific occurrences might be. Further, when public figures share such personal stories, it helps to demolish the old sceptical assumption that only those of limited education or working-class occupations would be 'foolish' enough to believe they had experienced something exceptional.

Indeed, to bring things full circle and return to one of the lives I first explored, Walter Franklin Prince dealt with this false assumption almost 100 years ago in his book *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences*.⁷ He produced evidence that prominent scientists, lawyers, physicians, Army and Navy officers, diplomats, poets, playwrights, artists, actors, musicians, clergymen, teachers, magicians and members of the nobility have all had anomalous experiences at some point in their lives. Many of these experiences are difficult to explain or rationalise, especially for the experiencer. It is clear that things are no different today: no matter what your profession, background or beliefs, exceptional experiences are commonplace and often highly therapeutic. They are something that most of us can relate to at least once in our lives, and so they become significant, are an important part of our life stories, and worthy of being retold.

NOTES

- 1 Martin Ebon, *They Knew the Unknown*, World Publishing Co., 1971.
- 2 Denis Brian, *The Enchanted Voyager: The Life of JB Rhine – An Authorized Biography*, Prentice Hall, 1982.
- 3 Walter Franklin Prince: *A Tribute to his Memory*, Boston Society for Psychic Research, 1935.
- 4 Julian Clary, *A Young Man's Passage*, Ebury Press, 2005.
- 5 Billy Connolly, *Windswept & Interesting: My Autobiography*, Two Roads, 2021.
- 6 Ozzy Osbourne, *I am Ozzy*, Sphere, 2009.
- 7 WF Prince, *Noted Witnesses for Psychic Occurrences*, Boston SPR, 1928.

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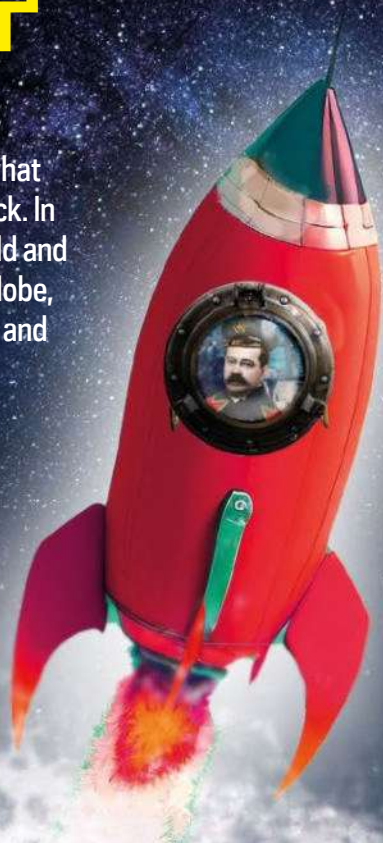
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The nameless grave

KATE CHERRELL unearths the tragic story behind a mysterious grave in a Lincolnshire village.

Be sure your sin will find you out.

It sounds like a warning, a threat of fire and brimstone. It's a fitting epitaph for the so-called 'Sinner's Grave'.

In the corner of a quaint churchyard, deep in the Lincolnshire countryside, sits one of the most disturbing graves in Britain. St Andrews Church at Irby Upon Humber is in the middle of a pretty little village. Towards the back of the church, close to the gate and set back from the little path, sits a tiny headstone. From afar, it looks unremarkable; small, mossy and often lost to sight when the grass is left to grow a little too wildly. The modest headstone is dwarfed by its grander neighbours and easily overlooked. There are no dates, no story, no grand carvings or symbolism: just a small, squat grave with a simple inscription: "Nameless. Be sure your sin will find you out."

It makes for an unsettling epitaph – not just another Victorian reminder of the inevitability of death, but rather a warning to all who pass by. At first glance, the grave could be that of a criminal, a murderer, an unwed mother, a suicide or simply an outcast shunned by the local community. However, reality is crueler than any conjecture.

On a cold Sunday morning in 1888, 13-year-old John Vickers was preparing for work in the fields surrounding the church at Irby. Employed by one Mr Nainby, he followed the same route across the fields to his employers' house as he had always done. As he walked the familiar path, he saw a huge gathering of crows, swarming together, ferociously pecking at a small carcass. He moved closer, believing the crows had



The headstone is dwarfed by its larger neighbours

got a lamb, causing them to flee and revealing the true focus of their attention. What the boy saw remained with him for the rest of his days.

It was the bloodied body of a baby. It had been buried in a shallow grave and easily unearthed by animals in the dead of night. Horrified and repulsed, the boy took off at a run, only stopping when he returned to his father and the Parson with the sickening news. A local woman, Mrs Lawes, wrote to *Lincolnshire Life* magazine in 1968, recalling a conversation she had with the then-elderly John Vickers. He recalled the horrors of his find, the "callous" nature of the body's burial and the walk back to the "tiny, naked baby" with his father and the Parson.

But who was the baby, who did it belong to, and how did this tiny village come to terms with such a grisly find?

Thanks to Irby's thorough burial records, a timeline of events can be established. According to the work of Canon Peter Mullins, only one recorded

death between the years of 1813 and 1996 was "nameless". The ledger states that on 21 Feb 1888, "By Coroners Order for Burial: I reverently committed to the grave the remains of the body of a new born child found in the parish."

The inquest was completed in a local house, with the coroner's findings published shortly thereafter. The coroner's report, despite being vague by modern standards, was conveyed to the *Grimsby Telegraph*, which reported on 24 February 1888 that "An inquest was held on the remains of the body of a newly born child, sex unknown, which was discovered in a green field which belongs to Mr W Nainby on Sunday last."

The impossibility of establishing the sex of the child, as with its identity, is troubling. Reports of the freshness of the burial imply that the baby had barely been in the ground long enough to begin decomposition before animals disinterred it; meaning that animal activity, rather than bacterial decomposition was the true cause of the "sex unknown" conclusion.

Despite the efforts of villagers, press and police, the parents of "Nameless" were never found. For a short time, blame was placed at the door of travellers, who had moved through the village some days before, yet this could never be proven.

The headstone was erected through the good will of the parish and community, with the Parson's choice of biblical quote becoming the memorable and unsettling legacy of the stone. Numbers 32.23 reads: "But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and be sure your sin will find you out." This choice of biblical quotation does not seem to address the interred child, but rather the reader. In adding these words to such a tiny stone, the people of Irby may have hoped that the shamed parents would see the warning and confess, or be aware of what would meet them in the judgement of the afterlife.

They may have believed that no fitting name, biblical or otherwise, could be attributed to the sexless child, so 'Nameless' remained as such. Choosing such a term, rather than 'anonymous' or 'unknown', seems cruel to modern eyes, but has become a subverted identity in itself as the years have gone by.

As the true story of the Nameless grave has been forgotten, it has entered the local imagination in a host of imagined and elaborate histories. Many believe it to be the resting place of a shamed woman or a local witch, or have hatched other fantastical theories. Yet in truth, the Nameless grave of Irby has haunted the churchyard since 1888, playing on the minds of all who hear its story. The identity of the child will never be known, nor will the cause of death, and we will never understand the human cruelty or sense of misguided shame that led to the child's shallow burial in a Lincolnshire field.

But we can be sure of one thing, regardless of faith: we are more than our given names and identities. Be kind, and help those in need. Otherwise, be sure your sin will find you out.

♦ **KATE CHERRELL** is a writer and academic specialising in 19th century Spiritualism. She curates the blog BurialsandBeyond.com.

Here's sick in your eye

MARK GREENER looks at some of the world's most disgusting self-experiments, including Dr Stubbins Ffirth's black vomit sauna, and their contributions to medical science

Charles Édouard Brown-Séquard, a “small dark man with a smile full of kindness”,¹ felt every one of his 72 years. His concentration was on the wane. His physical strength had weakened. He had toilet trouble. So, Brown-Séquard injected himself with the extracts of dogs’ and guinea pigs’ testicles. But Brown-Séquard’s self-experimentation seems restrained, almost mundane, compared with one researcher who wanted to discover how yellow fever spread.

These self-experimenters were not scientific mavericks: they were part of the medical and biological establishment. Brown-Séquard (1817-1894) made landmark discoveries in several areas of biology including the nervous system and hormones.² And he was a keen self-experimenter.

On one occasion, Brown-Séquard infused his blood into the corpses of guillotined criminals to show that the ‘dead’ tissue was still viable. On another, he wanted to explore the skin’s function. So, he cocooned himself in varnish. His students found Brown-Séquard unconscious and used sandpaper to remove the varnish.

In 1869, Brown-Séquard wondered whether injecting semen (which is rich in several hormones) into the blood of old men would boost their mental and physical prowess. Twenty years later, the septuagenarian Brown-Séquard told the



prestigious Parisian *Société de Biologie* that he’d injected himself subcutaneously (into the fat under the skin) on 10 occasions over three weeks with extracts made from the testicles of dogs and guinea pigs. Brown-Séquard said his concentration, physical strength and endurance, “jet of urine” and “power of defecation” all improved.

Self-injecting extracts of animal testicles is unpleasant enough. But a young American doctor, Dr Stubbins Ffirth, would be a shoo-in if there was a Nobel Prize for the most disgusting self-experiments.

To be fair, Ffirth was trying to solve a deadly puzzle. The death toll from yellow fever puts Covid-19 into the shade. In 1793, an outbreak of yellow fever killed one in 10 people living in Philadelphia.³ An 1878 outbreak in the Mississippi Valley led to 100,000 cases and 20,000 deaths.⁴ Vaccines were introduced in the 1930s. Yet today more than 200,000 people develop yellow fever each year and at least 30,000 people die from the infection.⁵

Most people infected with the virus that causes yellow fever do not feel unwell or they recover after feeling ill with ‘flu-like symptoms for a few days. But about one in five develops severe debilitating symptoms, such as



high fever, vomiting, dehydration and severe gastrointestinal bleeding that turns vomit black. Levels of a pigment in bile (bilirubin) build up, which colours the patient’s skin and eyes yellow.

The yellow fever virus seems to have emerged in East Africa within the last 1,500 years, spread to the continent’s Atlantic coast and, from there, to the Americas with the international trade in goods such as sugar, cotton, tobacco and, tragically, slaves. Epidemics occurred occasionally in Europe, but were especially common across Africa, and South, Central and North America. Between 1668 and 1870, New York alone endured at least 25 yellow fever epidemics.

For centuries, the way in which yellow fever spread between patients remained enigmatic. Most people believed you caught

LEFT: A satirical cartoon of Brown-Séquard’s ‘Elixir of Life’, published in 1896 in the weekly magazine *Judge*. BELOW: Dr Stubbins Ffirth. FACING PAGE: The result of Ffirth’s “disgusting” self-experiments, his 1804 *A Treatise on Malignant Fever; With an Attempt to Prove its Non-Contagious Nature*.

yellow fever through contact with those affected, fomites (objects that transmit infection such as clothing and sheets), patients’ vomit or faeces, or miasmas (bad air or fumes). Dr Stubbins Ffirth, (1784-1820) decided to solve the mystery.⁶

Writing in the early 19th century, Dr Ffirth commented that a yellow fever patient “has constant retchings to vomit, and discharges a dark coloured flakey substance, sometimes in small quantities; at others... pints, quarts, and even gallons are discharged.” He added that “When ejected in small quantities, it [the vomit] is of a dark brown colour, resembling very strong coffee with a portion of the grounds shook up in it; but when evacuated largely [in large amounts], it is of a colour more approaching to black, with dark coloured substances floating in it”.⁷ It’s worth bearing Ffirth’s evocative description of the black vomit in mind as you read what happened next.

After a few experiments on dogs and cats, on 4 October 1802, Ffirth made a shallow cut into his left forearm and “introduced some fresh black vomit” into the incision. The wound healed “very readily”.

Four days later, he “made a considerable incision in my right arm” and dripped five drops of “fresh black vomit” into the cut. Again, the wound healed in a few days without producing pus. Ffirth repeated these experiments more than 20 times on various parts of his body with vomit collected during yellow fever outbreaks in 1802 and 1803.

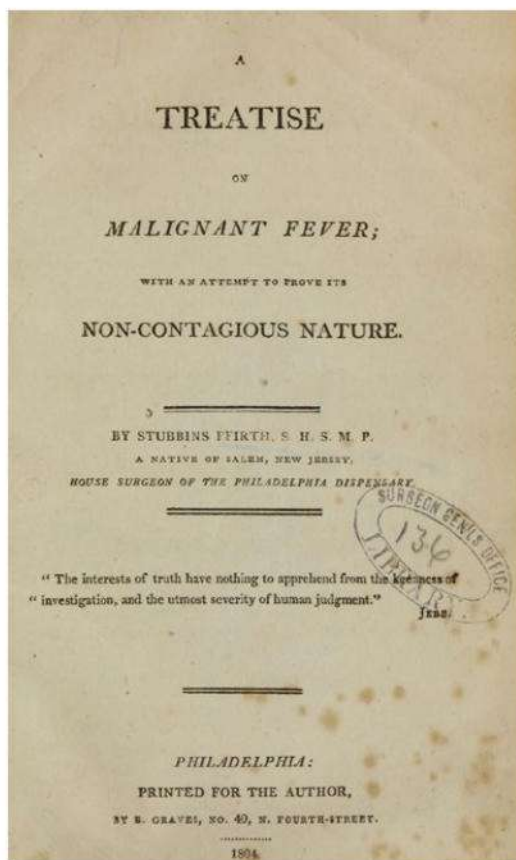


Clearly, cuts didn't act as a route of entry. So, Ffirth tested some more imaginative ways that yellow fever might spread between people. He placed three ounces of black vomit in an iron skillet on the fire and inhaled the fumes "without experiencing any unpleasant sensations".

A few days later, he heated six ounces of black vomit to 100°F and remained in the room for two hours as the vomit evaporated. He "very frequently" held his head over the dish inhaling the fumes. He felt a "great pain in my head, some nausea, and perspired very freely. Towards the close of the experiment, I felt languid and fainty, attended with great oppression at my breast." He recovered once in the fresh air. So, fumes weren't responsible. And Stubbins Ffirth's experiments became more nauseating.

The same day as his black vomit sauna, he swallowed the evaporated extract as a pill, without ill effect. During his next experiment, he "took half an ounce of the black vomit immediately after it was ejected from a patient". Ffirth diluted the vomit with the same amount of water – and drank the cocktail. Ffirth said that "the taste was very slightly acid". Stubbins notes that had he not accustomed himself to the taste and smell of the black vomit he would have puked. He repeated these experiments "a great number of times... during two successive epidemics," and increased the amount of black vomit he drank to two ounces without dilution".

Ffirth also applied blood, sweat, bile, saliva and urine from yellow fever patients into cuts into his body. And in, for my money, his most *recherché* and revolting research, Ffirth dripped "Two drops of fresh black vomit... into my right eye". Not surprisingly, Ffirth says he "felt a little uneasy for about a minute."



Yet he neither felt pain nor experienced inflammation. Ffirth concluded that yellow fever was not contagious.

About 150 years later, an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* notes that "Although the experiments were properly conducted and the data were sound, yellow fever could not be transmitted under the conditions of Ffirth's experiments".⁸ Ffirth's self-experiments may have been disgusting, but they showed that contact with yellow fever patients wasn't responsible for the outbreaks – and that was a critical observation.

Despite Ffirth's heroic self-experimentation, the spread of yellow fever remained a mystery. Then, in 1881, the Cuban doctor Carlos Finlay suggested that it was transmitted by mosquitoes.

Perhaps inevitably, many experts were sceptical. But between 1900 and 1902, a team led by the US army doctor Walter Reed showed that Finlay was right. Volunteers, including members of Reed's team, allowed themselves to be

bitten by mosquitoes gorged on the blood of yellow fever patients. The study showed that the saliva of infected mosquitoes transmits yellow fever virus.⁹ One commission member, Jesse Lazear, died from the disease.

So, what happened to our self-experimenters? After graduation, Ffirth spent several years at sea and wrote about subjects such as tetanus, fevers, shipboard ailments and hepatitis. He settled in Charleston, where he died in 1820. The epitaph on his tombstone reads: "As a Physician he was eminent in his profession, had an extensive practice, was prompt and ready at every call, whether proceeding from the poor or the rich, as thousands can testify."

In 1854, Brown-Séguard faced a cholera epidemic in his native Mauritius. At the time, some doctors suggesting treating cholera with opium. (Cholera causes copious diarrhoea, which opium counters by producing constipation. You can still buy kaolin and morphine in high-street chemists for diarrhoea – but follow the instructions.) To see if opium worked, Brown-Séguard swallowed cholera patients' vomit. When he felt that he had cholera's symptoms, he took a large amount of laudanum (opium mixed with strong alcohol). Not surprisingly, the laudanum left him semiconscious, curled up in a corner of his room and just about able to signal for coffee.

Ffirth should have the last word. His 1804 book *A Treatise on Malignant Fever: With an Attempt to Prove its Non-Contagious Nature* summarised his experiments. A reviewer from the *Philadelphia Medical Museum* magazine had watched Stubbins Ffirth drink diluted and undiluted black vomit and considered this experiment "as unnecessary as it was disgusting. After the proof of

its [the black vomit's] harmless nature upon animals, it required only a very strong stomach to extend it to the human subject".¹⁰

Ffirth replied: "You are pleased to say the experiment was 'disgusting,' as well as 'unnecessary:'—to a belle or *petit-maitre* [dandy or fop], it certainly would be extremely so... [but] it is the opinion of the most learned and best men, that the progress of science tends to the extension of human happiness; every thing therefore having a relation to this, whether it be disgusting or not, is laudable."¹¹

NOTES

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10 Anonymous, Review of "An Inaugural Dissertation on Malignant Fever...". *Philadelphia Medical Museum*, 1805;1:114-120.

11 Anon, "Stubbins H Ffirth (1784-1820)", op. cit.

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Deep dives into the unknown

This engrossing, thought-provoking study of ‘high strangeness’ makes a formidable case for an innovative approach to the unanswered mysteries of our world and existence, says **Bob Rickard**

Deep Weird

The Varieties of High Strangeness Experience

Jack Hunter, ed.

August Night Press 2023

Pb, 409pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781786772244

August Night Press is an imprint of White Crow Books, the publisher of a substantial catalogue of titles arguing, generally, that we are more than “animated meat”. These include Dr Hunter’s previous anthology of papers *Greening the Paranormal* [reviewed FT388:59]. What is significant here is that under Hunter’s editorial vision, *Deep Weird* not only recapitulates *Greening* but builds upon it, making a formidable case for an innovative approach to the unanswered mysteries of our world and existence.

Significantly, expressions of “scientific reasoning” are not solely modern but can be found in the studies of phenomena by the natural philosophers of ancient cultures well before the Common Era. What distinguishes the modern period is the extent to which scientific inquiry has been strictly limited by materialism and so-called rationalism. For example, it has signally failed to explain to us what consciousness is.

In both volumes, Hunter has argued that the modern industrialised and commercialised world has lost almost every sense of the paranormal which was an integral and “normalised” element of human society for the greater part of its social and psychological evolution; and a consequence of that distancing is the wholesale degradation (if not actual loss) of the appropriate processes of dealing with anomalous experiences.

No sensible fortean would

deny that by focusing upon what could be measured, manipulated and reliably demonstrated, science has achieved wonders that have benefited modern life; but the charge led by Hunter and his fellows addresses the anomalous phenomena manifesting outside the ring-fenced preoccupations of the citadel of orthodoxy. Charles Fort was, mistakenly, accused of being anti-science, but his inquiries were deliberately suggestive of a “more inclusive science”. This was well expressed by William James, who argued that: “Anyone will renovate his science who will steadily look after the irregular phenomena, and when the science is renewed, its new formulas often have more of the voice of the exception in them than of what were supposed to be the rules.”

In *Deep Weird*, we hear that voice taken up by a new generation of pioneers, boldly wrestling with mysterious phenomena – defined herein as “varieties of high

strangeness experience” – and not afraid to try new, more inclusive methods, and (if need be) more direct experience. This demonstrates that on the frontiers of modern science are minds just as disciplined, sensible, and capable as those of their academic critics.

Deep Weird has three parts, each focusing upon a particular mode of questioning, interpretation and understanding the significant problems presented by high strangeness phenomena. The first samples different forms of anomalistic experience: such

They don’t shy away from adopting innovative methods of questioning and theorising

as coincidences, out-of-body experiences, mediumistic materialisations, poltergeists, fairies, bigfoot and entheogen-induced entities.

In the second part, three experimental methodologies are tested for interpreting the dynamic imagery exchanged between a high strangeness event and its experimenter. These are detailed studies comparing the methodologies of psychologists, folklorists and ufologists.

Lastly, we are presented with five “deeper dives” by pioneering investigators who have spent much time exploring their particular specialities, all with new and fascinating case material. One explores the use of cinematic metaphors for understanding “virtual” or subjective “realities” as analogues of imaginative experiences.

Two quite different writers each tackle notions about “mental-creations” and our evolving understanding of physical and mental “reality”. These disturbingly “non-human” intrusions into our consensus “reality” are shown to be quite ancient, from deities, demons, tulpas and psychical parasites to apparitions and other entity types associated with traditions of magical conjuration, UFO encounters, hauntings and even ayahuasca “shamanic” experiences.

Then a discussion of “panpsychism” freshly exorcises Cartesian dualism as a philosophical “roadblock” to understanding

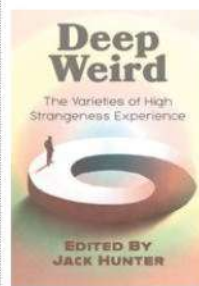
profound numinous experiences such as “panic” and religious awe when faced with an awareness of something “greater” in every respect than our everyday preconceptions. This is followed by a fascinating study of the ancient “shaking tent” ritual séances of the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region, and as an example of how paranormal phenomena have been successfully integrated into a rural culture.

There is a great deal more, but our space is limited. With a stellar list of erudite (and some, to FT readers, familiar) writers and researchers – including Jeffrey Kripal, Sharon Rawlette, Gregory Shushan, Samantha Treasure, Michael Grosso, Zofia Weaver, Alan Murdie, David Luke, Simon Young, Zelia Edgar, Leonardo Martins, Peter Rojcewicz, Barbara Fisher, Christopher Diltz, Joshua Cutchin, Anthony Peake, Peter Stjörstedt-Hughes, Susan Demeter and Renée Mazinegizhigo-kwe Bédard – you can be sure of an engrossing, thought-provoking and exciting read.

Their feet may be planted in the ground of academia, but their gaze is outward into the greater unknown. They describe new or evolving forms of inquiry into “high strangeness” phenomena, and don’t shy away from adopting innovative methods of questioning and theorising – and even in some cases personal experimentation – in their search for better understanding.

One of the exciting “take-aways” from this anthology is that the work begun by Fort is recognised and that “paranthropology” is ramping up as an authentic new branch of scientific inquiry. Jack Hunter deserves the admiration of all forteans for these important, provocative and exciting steps forward.

★★★★★



Liberace with attitude

Hedonism and showmanship epitomised the most famous Satanist, finds **Chris Hill**

Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan

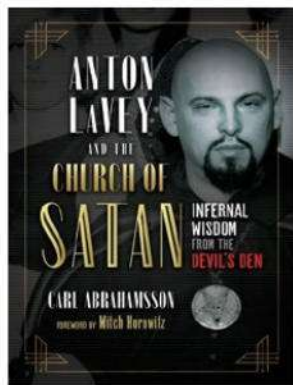
Infernal Wisdom from the Devil's Den

Carl Abrahamsson

Inner Traditions 2022

Pb, 424pp, £18.99, ISBN 9781644112410

Given the scope of available candidates for the title of Devil incarnate, one finds it difficult to imagine that Anton LaVey would even get a look in! LaVey was born in Chicago in 1930, and his ascendancy to High Priest of his very own Church of Satan is the stuff of "pulp" itself. He was a talented musician (affirmed by all who knew him), but a far from dependable narrator; his fanciful tales of working the burlesque bars and seedy carnivals are recalled here with tongues firmly in cheeks. That noted, Carl Abrahamsson's



collection of interviews with friends, lovers and fellow devotees provides a very human, humorous and sympathetic account of a man born to notoriety. Neither a controlling mystic nor a heartless Darwinian, LaVey remained a gentleman and a loyal friend to all who shared his company, we discover.

More Liberace with attitude than Lucifer, LaVey offered a brand of Satanism with its roots in the hedonism that dominated post-war consumerist society. Tapping

into the emergent self-help and personal growth industry, he mixed a bit of Nietzsche and some old fashioned anti-authoritarian individualism with a healthy dash of showmanship. This was a winning formula that appealed both to Hollywood stars and countercultural figures such as Jayne Mansfield and Kenneth Anger – by 1969 the San Francisco Black House was the place to be. With a run of successful titles to his name, notably *The Satanic Bible* (1969) and *The Satanic Rituals* (1972), LaVey began to attract media interest. No shrinking violet, he appeared on such primetime staples as *Donahue* and the *Tonight Show* and featured in *Time* and *Newsweek*.

By putting magic back into popular culture LaVey helped consolidate Satanism as a legitimate philosophical discourse and weathered the Satanic panic backlash of later decades with wry aplomb. Testimony from such occult luminaries as the Crowlean apostle Kenneth Anger, the current priestly incumbents of the Church, Peter Gilmore and Peggy Nadramia, and former partner Blanche Barton, all emphasise his enduring humanism and despair at collective hypocrisy. For a later generation of "esoterorists" such as Genesis P Orridge (1950-2020), LaVey demonstrated how spectacle offered an antidote to quotidian reality. Abrahamsson's documentation of a complex personality is a welcome addition to existing biographical material and contextualises his life in a mature and unsensational manner.

Regardless of what one may think of LaVey and his philosophy, he has more than earned his place in the ranks of countercultural mavericks and Abrahamsson celebrates this glorious fact.

A fascinating portrait of a major media manipulator and raconteur – everybody's favourite Satanist.

★★★★★

The Aliens Are Here

Extraterrestrial Visitors in American Cinema and Television

Fraser A Sherman

McFarland 2022

Pb, 243pp, £39.95, ISBN 9781476685045

Films about extraterrestrial visitors were not very common until the 1950s when film producers gleefully got onboard the flying saucer bandwagon – or should that be mothership?

The 1950s was a golden era for flying saucer and science fiction films, when there was both optimism and fear about the latest science and technology. Not only could our own atom bombs destroy our planet but the superior technology of aliens could be used to invade and destroy us. Sometimes, as in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the aliens could use their superior technology to save us from our own folly.

The saucer became a perfect image to encapsulate the idea of futuristic, gleaming, highly advanced spacecraft. What came out of these craft could be powerful robots like Gort or, more likely, either humanoids in one-piece suits or some form of monstrous being. The saucer became associated with government cover-ups and Men in Black.

Alien visitors also allowed film makers to make them a metaphor for the fear of immigrants, communists and for anything out there and "other" that we fear and do not understand.

New-fangled television also got in on the act, and by the 1960s it gave us such memorable series as *My Favorite Martian*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits* and *The Invaders*. This decade also brought us the Betty and Barney Hill case that put alien abductions into the mainstream and Erich von Däniken's concept of ancient astronauts.

Since then, films and TV have continued to explore and exploit this subject with varying degrees of success, or, as in the case of *Plan 9 From Outer Space*, utter failure on every level. To better understand how filmmakers have addressed the subject

Sherman concentrates on American, and a few British, productions that feature aliens visiting Earth.

Each chapter covers different themes and aspects of alien films, including invasions, friendly visitors, body snatchers, alien superheroes, abductions, alien immigrants, sex and space beings, gods from outer space, monsters, love stories, children and alien encounters, comedies, MIB and genre mashups.

Using examples from well-known and obscure films and TV, Sherman provides an informative guide to each topic, followed by a detailed "spotlight" on specific films related to that chapter's theme, and a listing and brief description of other related TV and films.

A handy bibliography is provided, but it is disappointing that there are no web references or mentions of the works of Martin Kottmeyer and Mark Pilkington or any academic studies. Sherman also does not discuss in detail films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or *Arrival* because he did not find them informative or enjoyable enough to write about.

Nonetheless this is a very useful guide to how this subgenre of science fiction has embraced the subject and how it has evolved and changed since *The Purple Monster Strikes* serial invaded our movie theatres in 1945.

Nigel Watson

★★★★★

Between Ape and Human

An Anthropologist on the Trail of a Hidden Hominoid

Gregory Forth

Pegasus Books 2022

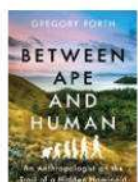
Hb, 336pp, £22, ISBN 9781639361434

Gregory Forth, an anthropologist from the University of Alberta, was studying the culture of the Nage people on the Indonesian island of Flores. One of their most interesting beliefs was that of the *ebu-gogo* or ancestor that eats everything. These were a race of metre-tall, hairy people with ape-like faces. The *ebu-gogo* made a nuisance of themselves by raiding the Nage's crops and killing their livestock with bamboo spears..

All this seemed like nothing but a colourful piece of folklore, until 2005 when the sub-fossil remains of *Homo floresiensis* were



uncovered in the Liang Bau cave on the island. The three-foot (90cm) hominins lived around 50,000 years ago, an eye-blink in evolutionary terms. Most interestingly, the remains were found to be a sister group to *Homo habilis*, an African hominin thought to have died out 1.9 million years ago. More recently the remains of a closely related species were unearthed in the



Philippines and named *Homo luzonensis*.

H. floresiensis was a perfect match for the Nage's description

of the *ebu-gogo* that Forth had recorded stories about years before. Furthermore, he unearthed modern-day sightings of creatures that sounded just like them.

In *Between Ape and Human* Forth's research switches to the eastern area of the island with the Lio people. The Lio talk of meetings with a creature they call *Lia ho'a* or ape-men. They describe these as metre-tall, upright-walking, hairy man-like creatures with faces like monkeys. The body hair is a darker colour than that of the local monkeys.

What he uncovers from eyewitnesses is remarkably consistent and contains no fantastical elements. Witnesses usually meet the *Lia ho'a* in deep mountain forests in the east of Flores. Despite their small size, the ape-men are very strong, but they do not attack people. They sometimes raid crops and will eat corn on the stalk without breaking it off like monkeys do. There are no gibbons on Flores and only one kind of monkey, the long-tailed macaque, that is far smaller and walks on all fours.

In the early 1970s a *Lia ho'a* was hit by a van on a remote road and killed; five men examined the carcass closely. In 2010 another witness, with an agriculture degree, examined another dead specimen. In the late 1990s two women and a man saw a *Lia ho'a* near a cultivated area, that threw stones at an attacking dog; the women were badly frightened by the creature.

Forth concludes that these hominins represent a surviving strain of *H. floresiensis* or something closely related. The mountainous jungles of eastern

Flores are poorly explored and a perfect retreat for a small unknown hominin; it makes you wonder what else is out there.

A wonderful book.

Richard Freeman

★★★★★

The Chronicles of Meonia

A True Story of Magic, Mystery and Extraordinary Paranormal Phenomena

Giuseppe La Rosa

Meonia Publishing 2022

Pb, 260pp, £19.95, ISBN 9798437740651

The "new ufology" of late 1970s Britain uncovered many interesting high-strangeness cases including nine-year-old Gaynor Sunderland's sighting of a landed UFO, and subsequent encounter with the aliens Arne and Parz. Jenny Randles's and Peter Hough's book *Alien Contact* publicised the story, albeit uncritically, after which Gaynor and her mother Marion became involved with Graham Phillips, Andy Collins and Martin Keatman of the Parasearch team. Via psychic messages received by Marion, they and others were directed on psychic quests across the length and breadth of Britain, picking up psychically retrieved



artefacts including jewels and swords as they went.

The Chronicles of Meonia charts these adventures in great detail,

even down to the dialogue spoken at the time. At a distance now it reads like gullible people playing Dungeons and Dragons (coincidence or causation?) in real life, but for those involved it was an exciting and adventurous time, as saving the world from evil can be; think Dennis Wheatley crossed with Phil Rickman and you'll get the vibe. If you believe in this sort of thing, you will really enjoy this book, and if you want to get involved, psychic questing (PQ) is still an active scene. But is any of it actually true?

This reviewer, then an active ufologist and Earth Mysterian, watched sceptically as PQ developed. I knew many of the players and was later married to Gaynor Sunderland (long since distanced from PQ) for several years and was told that PQ and

its quests were hoaxes, initially concocted by her and Graham Phillips and brought to life by the unwitting participants. The Green Stone (of the book of that title by Phillips and Keatman) and other objects were a mixture of costume jewellery and cheap antiques with no intrinsic powers other than those vested in them by the belief of the questers.

Following Marion's death, Gaynor came into possession of the Green Stone etc and I brokered their sale in an online auction. The buyer duly arrived and handed over £14,000 in used notes in exchange for the artefacts. He gazed reverentially at the Green Stone and asked: "Does it still have the power?" Gaynor held his gaze and told him, truthfully: "Yes, it has the same power it always had."

The Chronicles of Meonia is best read with tongue firmly in cheek and a pinch of salt to hand. Despite my informed scepticism, which won't change the beliefs of those involved/duped, it is worth reading for what it tells us about belief, gullibility, legend tripping and many other key fortaean fundamentals.

The definitive book about psychic questing really needs to be written, but not by one of its creators or participants.

Andy Roberts

★★★★★

How to Talk to a Science Denier

Conversations with Flat Earthers, Climate Deniers, and Others Who Defy Reason

Lee McIntyre

MIT Press 2022

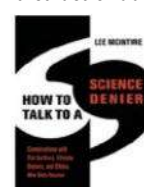
Pb, 280pp, £16.99, ISBN 9780262545051

In this era of post-truth, outlandish conspiracy theories and science denial, debates about subjects such as vaccinations, climate change and genetically modified organisms are often acrimonious, divisive and heated. In this thought-provoking book Lee McIntyre, from Boston University's Center for Philosophy and History of Science, considers how scientists and their supporters can challenge and change the entrenched views that underlie and fuel science denial.

Take Flat Earthers: McIntyre, who attended the 2018 Flat Earth International Conference, notes

that the theory's adherents are completely serious and are "routinely persecuted", losing their jobs, being asked to leave their churches and alienating their families. And the view isn't as uncommon as you might expect: some 11 million people in Brazil are Flat Earthers.

McIntyre notes that "Flat Earthers have a profound distrust of authority – and



great belief in first-person sensory experience". Many endured trauma that led them to question everything, which

coincided with their conversion to flat earth theory. Being a Flat Earther is not an evidence-based belief, he comments, but an identity that could give life purpose.

In a wide-ranging discussion, McIntyre covers conspiracy theories, climate change, vaccinations and genetically modified organisms. Despite the varied topics, science deniers, McIntyre argues, make five reasoning errors: belief in conspiracy theories; cherry-picking evidence; relying on fake experts and denigrating real experts; setting science impossible expectations; and committing logical errors.

Many issues are, however, more complex than simple reasoning errors. A particularly compelling chapter discusses climate change with coal miners in Pennsylvania. Many miners and their families accept climate change. But mining's dangers breed a certain fatalism. And, especially in poorer working class areas, people worry more about the day-to-day reality of paying the bills than a nebulous future threat.

There are no easy answers. To reach out to deniers, McIntyre suggests direct personal contact, showing respect and humility, and being transparent and open about how science works. In particular, McIntyre argues that a "willingness to change their hypothesis if it does not fit with the evidence" separates science from non-science.

And he asks a question that everyone – conspiracy theorist, fortaean or scientist – should bear in mind: "What evidence, if it existed, would it take to convince you that you were wrong?"

Mark Greener

★★★★★

Northern Lights

Christopher Josiffe praises a long-overdue history of Finland's esoteric traditions: magic, Theosophy, Freemasonry, parapsychology – and UFOs

Lightbringers of the North

Secrets of the Occult Tradition of Finland

Perttu Häkkinen & Vesa Iitti

Inner Traditions 2022

Pb, 440pp, £25, ISBN 9781644114636

A history of Finland's esoteric traditions is long overdue; for centuries, Finns have had a reputation as powerful magicians and sorcerers, perhaps owing to their conflation with the nomadic and shamanic Sámi.

While Scandinavian pre-Christian magical practices are well-documented, thanks to the Prose and Poetic Eddas and to runic inscriptions (largely unknown in Finland), the same cannot be said for their Finnish equivalents. In part due to the impenetrability of the Finnish language – neither Germanic, Romance nor Slavic – Finland's subaltern status as a colonial possession of Sweden (for several hundred years) and Russia (for over one hundred more) is also a factor.

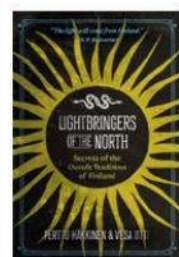
Originally published in Finnish in 2015, *Lightbringers of the North* focuses on the last 150 years. The authors' dry, laconic wit is most appropriate for those chapters examining eccentric and often distasteful figures like Ior Bock, "the Sperm Magician of Gumbostrand", Reima Saarinen, the "Sex Magick Soldier of Turku", and "Archbishop of Lucifer" Pekka Siitoin.

Siitoin claimed his 1944 birth was due to a liaison between high-ranking German army officer and baron, Peter von Weltheim, and a Finnish-Russian sex worker. The authors rightly describe Siitoin as an "unintentionally comic neo-Nazi". But his volatile mixture of left-hand-path esotericism and far-right politics appears to be a recurring aspect of Finnish esotericism, as a subsequent chapter on the crossover between Finnish occultism and nationalism demonstrates.

"Renaissance Finn" Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa is mostly

remembered as a sculptor and painter; in the 1890s he exhibited at Sar Péladan's *Salon de la Rose + Croix* in Paris, where he became friends with Strindberg. But Aspa was also an actor, poet, musician and amateur linguist who argued that the world's tongues were all descended from a Finnish proto-language, which in its modern form was close to the original language of the Bible (rather than Hebrew or Greek). It logically followed (according to Aspa) that if Finnish was the world's ur-language, then Finns were the world's proto-people. He regarded the "Aryan race" as a branch of a prehistoric Finno-Ugric clan, with Germanic peoples descended from this ancient clan.

Theosophy was big up north; Blavatsky herself said: "the light



will come from Finland". Pekka Ervast, the "Rudolf Steiner of the North", founded the Rosicrucian-influenced independent Theosophical group *Ruusu-Risti* following a disagreement with Besant and Leadbeater. *Lightbringers* looks at the history of Freemasonry in Finland, but doesn't say whether Finnish lodges are repositories of esoteric wisdom or simply dining clubs (as in England).

An enlightening chapter on the history of Finnish parapsychology looks at its *Sällskapet för psykisk forskning* (Society for Psychic Research, SPF) which bears some comparison with Britain's Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Finland's SPF was originally established (in 1907) with the intention of examining alleged paranormal phenomena using scientific methodology. But, like the SPR, a rift arose between the sceptical and pro-Spiritualist wings of the organisation. This, the authors suggest, was because its membership consisted more of lay per-

sons than academics (although, by contrast, the British SPR counted several eminent scientists, psychologists and philosophers among its membership).

An illuminating chapter outlines the history of Finnish ufology, which, according to *Lightbringers*, has always been tinged with esotericism. One of Finland's earliest-recorded UFO encounters took place in 1728, when a giant disc appeared over Sahalahti village. Local blacksmith, seer and healer Tiittu Siegfredsson was last seen heading into a nearby forest. After three days, his son went looking for him. In the forest he encountered a large bear who, speaking in Finnish, said he should not be afraid, but told him there was no point searching for his father – as the "ship in the sky" had taken his father "to the heavens, to another better world, inhabited by a race higher than man".

I would have liked more focus on the resurgence of paganism in Finland, whose conversion to Christianity only took place in the 13th century. As late as the 18th century, rural ministers were complaining to their bishops of their parishioners' reverence for streams, rocks and trees. The neo-pagan groups *Suomenusko* ("Finnish Belief") and *Karhun Kansa* ("People of the Bear") were established in the early 21st century, but the *Ukkonusko* (belief in Ukko, the sky, thunder and weather god) organisation dates back to the early 20th century. Finland has a landmass 40 per cent larger than the United Kingdom, but a population of just 5.5 million. Consequently, its human population is surrounded by nature, so it's not surprising if paganism is on the rise.

Lightbringers (the first English-language book I'm aware of that sheds light on the neglected esoteric traditions of a modern European nation) is a welcome addition to our knowledge and understanding of European occultual history.

★★★★★

England on Fire

A visual journey through Albion's psychic landscape

Stephen Ellcock & Mat Osman

Watkins 2022

Hb, 256pp, £25, ISBN 9781786784285

Better known as the lead singer of Suede, Mat Osman has collaborated with image curator Stephen Ellcock to put together this offbeat cornucopia of English art. It presents Englishness as something rebellious and magical, and even promises a coming regeneration after the nation's present malaise: "a new land – an enchanted, enchanting, maddening, quickening, furious, funny and fabulous England".

English art is an eccentric, low-church sort of business, be it leafy and rustic or urban and grimy. We don't produce much in the way of Old Masters or neo-classical virtuosos, compared to the Continent; we tend more towards hedgerow visionaries and carefully crafted lunacy.

Ranging from fairies to riot photos, the book is organised into thematic sections – an appropriately non-metric dozen



– including "Weeds & Wilderness", "Stones", "The Way" (paths, tracks and mazes), "Arcadia" and more, each section having a short prose text by Osman. Along with the usual suspects – William Blake, the burnished rural visions of Samuel Palmer, the grandiose apocalyptic scenes of John "Mad" Martin and the insanely fine artistry of Richard Dadd, we find Cathy de Monchaux, Ken Kiff, Sutapa Biswas, Yinka Shonibare, Derek Jarman and over 120 others.

My only complaint is the number of images cut by the centre-fold; this constitutes a serious offence in an art book. Other than that, though, this is a box of delights, chiefly due to Ellcock's broad range of curation and the often haunting beauties he offers up. Discoveries for me included John Bingley Garland, a 19th-century collage artist, and George Shaw, who can paint woodland scenes with an old-school perfection but who is still working today and in the unexpected medium of Humbrol enamel – but every reader will have their own.

Phil Baker

★★★★★

THE UK'S TOP NOSTALGIA MONTHLY

FROM A GALAXY NOT THAT FAR AWAY

British expertise, British festivals and British settings have often made Hollywood films better says **Chris Hallam**

FROM A GALAXY NOT THAT FAR AWAY

HOLLYWOOD'S BRITISH MADE BLOCKBUSTERS

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Holidays in the sun

Brandon Cronenberg continues to follow in his father's bloody footsteps in his latest, part knowing Nepo-baby exercise in body horror, part satire on the excesses of a morally bankrupt global elite



Infinity Pool

Dir Brandon Cronenberg, US 2023
On UK release

With a surname like Cronenberg come many expectations in the film industry, and with his latest effort, *Infinity Pool*, Brandon Cronenberg once again shows that the worm-infested apple does not fall far from the body horror tree planted by his father.

On an extravagant and exclusive island resort, we are introduced to the Fosters – unsuccessful writer James (Alexander Skarsgård) and his wife Em (Cleopatra Coleman), the latter being the daughter of the wealthy publisher who published James's only book to date.

Idyllic and luxurious as the surroundings may seem, we soon learn that they are in stark contrast to the rest of the island, which is plagued by crime and a deeply corrupt police force that gladly accepts bribes to ignore injustices. This juxtaposition becomes even more glaring once James and Em become acquainted with another affluent pair, Gabi (Mia Goth) and Alban (Jalil Lespert).

As the two couples begin to spend time together, it soon becomes clear that something is

'off' with the hedonistic Gabi and Alban, and it is not long before James and Em find themselves in serious trouble after an intoxicated James hits a local man with their car.

This is where the film starts to go well and truly off the rails in true Cronenbergian fashion with increasingly dizzying cinematography and grotesque body horror. Beyond the imagery being visually confrontational – graphic sex and violence, gore and bodily fluids – there is also a darkly satirical undercurrent saturating the film, as it comments on the levels of depravity and nihilism the one per cent can afford to indulge in, not to mention being able to afford to deal with the consequences of their unhinged actions in a manner that casts ethics entirely aside.

While the social commentary of *Infinity Pool* raises very valid questions about humanity and the price someone is willing to pay in order to rub elbows – and, as this is a Cronenberg film, other bits as well – with the upper echelons of society, the film mostly just scratches the sordid surface here in order to shock the audience, which makes the whole thing somewhat less impactful than

it could have been had the points it raises been explored in greater detail.

That being said, it's still worth a watch. Not only are some of the visuals genuine nightmare fuel, the performances of Skarsgård and Goth in particular stand out, thanks to his ability to be at once vulnerable and unhinged, and her commitment to being as uncompromising and unafraid as possible in the roles she chooses.

Where Cronenberg senior has seemingly reached a more philosophical point in his storytelling – compared

to the disturbing body horror that cemented his reputation as one of the most inventive horror filmmakers of all time – Brandon continues to show that he is more than capable of creating his own unique hellscape embracing nightmarish narratives and grotesque visuals. It will be interesting to see how the younger Cronenberg's career unfolds.

Leyla Mikkelsen



Come Back Lucy

Dir Paul Harrison, UK 1978
Network, £20 (DVD)

Come Back Lucy was one of several time-slip children's novels televised in the 1970s and 1980s, including *A Traveller in Time*, *Tom's Midnight Garden*, *Moondial* and *The Children of Green Knowe*. There are familiar tropes: a lonely, rather withdrawn child being sent to stay with strangers in an unfamiliar house and having a paranormal encounter, usually with something or someone from the past.

Orphan Lucy (Emma Bakhle), who is maybe around 12, has lived a quiet and old-fashioned life with her elderly great aunt Olive.

The story starts with her aunt's funeral, and Lucy being sent to stay with distant cousins in a noisy and relentlessly "modern" family – the three over-lively children call their right-on but incompetent parents Pete and Gwen.

The weirdness begins with the opening titles over music that sets your teeth on edge: we see the back of the head of a girl who is looking in a mirror; the mirror girl moves away but the head doesn't – and when the head turns, there is no face. In the attic Lucy sees another girl in a mirror, who says: "I'm Alice, and I live here." Alice (Bernadette Windsor) takes Lucy back to her own time in the house, 1873 – a century before the original novel by Pamela Sykes was published.

Initially Lucy enjoys spending time in the Victorian home, a respite from the boisterous family she's been thrown into; in many ways it's more like the quiet life she lived with her aunt. But as the story progresses we realise that Alice is manipulative and malicious; she tries to force Lucy to stay with her rather than returning to her own time. Both girls realise that Lucy can travel back by looking into a mirror – so Alice turns the mirrors around. In the final episode the story comes to a dramatic and frightening climax when Alice persuades Lucy to walk out onto the frozen lake in a nearby park and tries to trap her forever by killing her.

Come Back Lucy is certainly watchable, but it doesn't quite have the haunting and memorable qualities of similar time-slip series.

Extras include present-day interviews with director Paul Harrison, writers Colin Shindler and Gail Renard, and one of the children, François Evans, and a conversation between Emma Bakhle and Bernadette Windsor.

David V Barrett





TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortaean offerings



In an attempt to find a new angle in paranormal TV, *Help! My House Is Haunted* hit upon the innovative idea of sending investigators into haunted locations and filming the results. The doughty team of world-renowned psychic Chris Fleming, truth-seeking Parisienne Sandy Lakdar ("Mah bod-y is mah first deetect-or!") and tech expert Barri Ghai stroll about purposefully in classic British sites. There is tech, there are séances, there's low-light and people going "Oh my God! What was that?" A breath of fresh air, in other words.

A spin-off materialised almost immediately: *Celebrity Help! My House Is Haunted* (Discovery). A 66

per cent different squad for this one, comprising "Dark arts specialist" Ian Lawman, psychologist and historian Jayne Harris, who occasionally describes herself in the third person, and Barri Ghai returning to wave his instruments about. These three roam the land ridding celebrities of troublesome spooks (as usual "celebrity" is a very loose term, at least three of them being of the reality/social media type of

These three roam the land ridding celebrities of their troublesome spooks

whom people over 25 have never heard). One of the others is property presenter and cockatoo in human form Martin Roberts, whose 17th century gaff in the Rhondda Valley has a smorgasbord of haunty stuff happening, none of which, presumably, constitutes period charm.

Before they even arrive, Ian is getting feelings of "energy" and once in the house he spots a "large lady with something cast iron in her hand"; more timorous souls would have taken this as a cue to move out of the way, but Lawman is undaunted, and soon sees a little boy running from the room (at least *he* has the right idea). Next it's a grey lady with a flowing dress (cut to Jayne chatting with a local expert; yes, there's a grey lady, but then there is in most places if you look hard enough). Poking around the bedroom, Lawman finds another child, coughing up blood. Luckily

Roberts isn't with him or he'd be addressing the camera and suggesting adding an en-suite.

Barri chats with a builder who saw lights going on and off "when there was nobody else around" – unsure if that's a dig at electricians – and then they all meet with Roberts himself, sit down in the lounge for a quick history lesson (a family lived there, which is apparently significant) and start playing around with recording equipment. In true EVP style they all hear it say "Martin"; they do the stick figures thing with a motion sensor; they set up the low-light CCTV... you know the rest.

They look at the tapes, listen to the noises and deduce that Martin can live in harmony with the phenomena and... well, that's it. Martin waves them off while calculating how much a ghost adds to the resale value, and away they trundle to rescue another celeb. Innovative.

THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot!

Universal and NBC joined forces in 1973 to make "the most faithful adaption of Mary Shelley's famous novel", but calling it *Frankenstein: The True Story* (1973) was a bit misleading: this bears little resemblance to the book.

Compared to previous incarnations, the film feels a tad 'true-er'. Gone is the shambling, loveable dunce portrayed by Boris Karloff. This jigsaw zombie is a handsome and cultured gentleman, albeit barefoot. Yet having excellent hair, nice teeth and a love for opera is still a far cry from the erudite and philosophical New Adam Shelly imagined. This creature is still a child, and his saying words like 'Figaro' and 'Beautiful' every two minutes isn't much of a step-up from

Karloff's grunts. But then the teeth go, the warts start, and we're back in monster land.

The film distracts you by ramming its epic running time with crazy new characters played by every celebrity alive at the time. Like Jayne Seymour, who had only wrapped *Live and Let Die* two days before she started on *Frankenstein*.

Rather than take their cue from Shelley, the studios acted more like Frankenstein himself, knitting disparate body parts together to make a whole new creature. They sew the grotesque pulp of EC Comics onto period melodrama, tagging on swivel-eyed comedy and bolting it all down with genuine gothic sophistication. It might be a hodge-podge, but what an entertaining creation it is!

It might be a hodge-podge, but what an entertaining creation it is!

The wild and shocking set pieces have an insane energy. Take the dazzling scene on a storm-battered boat where a fellow hangs from the rigging and gets zapped into a full-on skeleton, Hanna Barbera style. Or a notorious movie moment at a ball that ends with a weeping James Mason cradling a severed head while people scream and faint around him. Oh, it's fab.

It's nice to see this version retain the subtext in the story. It's no surprise to learn how some in the gay community felt this film spoke to them at the time. It still does. Especially when the creature is shunned and abandoned, condemned to live alone in an ice world

because of a difference he has no control over.

The handsome production is served well by a frankly gorgeous Blu-Ray, and the commentary track shares fun little nuggets: like how the producers asked Queen Elizabeth if she'd film an introduction to the movie. They assumed she'd be eager to promote a story and author so quintessentially English. She declined – and saved her promo career for pushing Bond at the 2012 Olympics. Instead, they used a man who sounded even more English than the Queen – cast member James Mason. His delightfully clipped and snooty introduction is an extra. Hearing him berate the American audience – "I dare say most of you will assume that *Frankenstein* was a Hollywood creation. Let me educate you American chumps" – is a hoot.

So who cares if this isn't really 'the true story' when it offers such outrageous charms?

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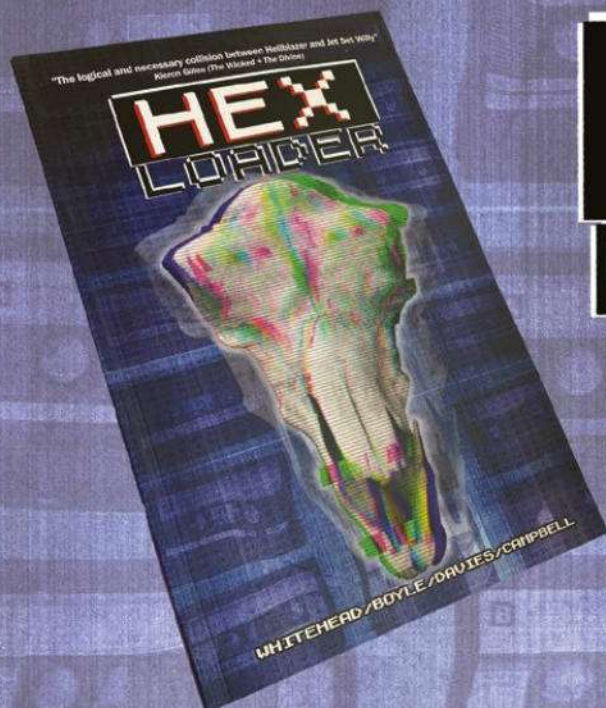
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Glen Coe

Alan Murdie's article "Spirits of Glencoe" [FT428:18-21] describes the infamous massacre, along with latterday commemorations of the event, and the general atmosphere of foreboding that seems to pervade the Glen and surrounding area.

Glen Coe is an area we have stayed in and passed through many times, and it certainly does have a power and brooding majesty all of its own, aided and abetted by the quite severe weather the Glen sometimes 'enjoys'. The stretch of the A82 heading north-bound just past the Falls of Coe, with the 'Three Sisters' to the left and Aonach Eagach ridge to the right being particularly impressive, the towering mountains which buttress each side of the Glen imposing their presence and grandeur. Nestled between two of these 'Three Sisters' lies the 'Hidden Valley', a place of quite uncanny stillness, over which some local traditions say no birds will fly.

The massacre of 1692 is also commemorated in a unique way by a sign above the door of the Clachaig Inn, at the western end of the Glen, which reads "No Hawkers or Campbells", while a far more modern horror haunts the small cottage sitting diagonally opposite the waterfalls – a cottage once owned by the depraved, latter-day monster that was Jimmy Savile.

Stan Sweeney

By email

Nazi UFOs

I feel I must write in to defend Jerry Glover from Mark Pearson's friendly criticism [FT429:62] of his kind review [FT426:52] of my recent book *The Saucer and the Swastika*. Probably the main reason Mr Glover doesn't mention much about Germany and other nations' various vaguely circular aircraft designs, specifically the alleged Nazi 'Bell' (*Die Glöcke*) time-travel spacecraft, in his review is because I barely mention them in my book itself either, beyond a page or two in the Introduction. The book reviewed was



Noel Morrissey sent us this photo, taken by his Uncle Harry, of a soil stain on a table cloth from a leaking plant pot that he suggests resembles a messianic Billy Connolly.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH or to sieveking@forteantimes.com

much more about the bizarre neo-Gnostic, neo-Nazi pseudo-religion later built upon legends about such things in the decades following Hitler's defeat, rather than about rumours concerning actual WWII-built Nazi flying saucers *per se*. I tell the full story about that in my other recent companion-book, *Nazi UFOs* (not yet reviewed in FT), which provides relevant photos and debunks at length the myths Mr Pearson mentions in his letter.

As regards SS General Hans Kammler and his

supposed involvement in building the Nazi Bell craft: yes, Mr Pearson is correct, there is "no smoke without at least *some* fire", but not in the sense he half-jokingly implies. Having proved his evil organisational genius by designing death-camps like Auschwitz, towards the end of the war Kammler was placed in charge of various SS weapons and slave-labour programmes, some of which involved the design and manufacture of *Wunderwaffen* (wonder-weapons) like the V-2 ballistic missile used to attack London during

the war's dying days. No doubt he was indeed up to *something* in his underground lair in Poland, as Mr Pearson suggests – but that doesn't mean he was building spaceships. Various perfectly ordinary Nazi weapons-factories were set up underground to shield them from Allied carpet-bombing.

The legend of The Bell first appears in Polish ancient astronaut theorist Igor Witkowski's 2000 book *The Truth About the Wunderwaffe*, in which he claims to have been allowed to read various classified documents about the device by an unnamed source within Polish officialdom – hence, you basically just have to take the whole narrative on trust. A 2019 book, Dean Reuter's *The Hidden Nazi*, plausibly reveals Kammler to have survived the war and been Paperclipped away Stateside by US intelligence officers, keen to tap his *Wunderwaffen* knowledge; he later seems to have killed himself in US custody.

As to what specific *Wunderwaffen* info Kammler had, no one still living appears to know; Reuter's best guess is he had designs for some radiological 'dirty bomb' intended to be delivered as a payload against London on his V-2 rockets, not workable UFO blueprints. Credulous online speculation that Kammler escaped Allied justice in 1945 by speeding away into the future in his time-travel Bell ship are most unlikely – although, then again...

SD Tucker

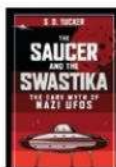
Widnes, Cheshire

Toy dangers

James Fisher's letter about deadly 1980s toy scares [FT429:61] reminded me that I had one of those murderous leatherette ETs, the eyes of which would fall off by themselves and somehow kill you. Years later my parents bought a superficially reminiscent doorstep made out of fabric in the shape of a dog and, compelled by some dim folk memory, duly gouged out its eyes, "just to be on the safe side."

Ryan Shirlow

Leeds, West Yorkshire



LETTERS

Anal exorcism

I thoroughly enjoyed SD Tucker on Trump Derangement Syndrome [FT429:50], which brought to mind Ken Campbell's unlikely tales of London Gas-tromancers at the 2009 FT Un-convention, and the Golgothan confronted by Jay and Silent Bob in Kevin Smith's *Dogma*.

However, he did not include what, for my money, is one of the most entertaining tales of 'anal exorcism'. This can be found in the autobiography of the Renaissance goldsmith and sculptor Benvenuto Cellini. As well as being a master craftsman with an ego to match – he did not rate Michelangelo, considering him an inferior talent to himself – he is an enormously entertaining writer who recorded every last detail of his tumultuous exploits as he fought, shagged and drank his way across 16th century Italy, putting himself in the best possible light at every turn of course.

At one point, he finds himself in Rome, working on a commission from the Pope, and falls in with a necromancer, whom he persuades to carry out a ritual to obtain the affections of a Sicilian beauty. They decamp to the ruins of the Colosseum, accompanied by assistants, including a 12-year-old apprentice from Cellini's studio, and set about summoning demons. This involves a magic circle, set up with a good deal of theatrics from the necromancer, and a bonfire on which perfumes are burned to entice the demons. Once they set about their business, results are swift, and so successful that many legions of demons start manifesting in the ruins, which makes the necromancer nervous, and he starts intoning banishing rituals, but to no effect; the demonic horde continues increasing and pressing in on the circle, becoming ever more menacing.

Cellini and companions are by now quaking with fear, and even throwing foul-smelling asafetida on the fire fails to drive back the demons. Then, half-crazed with fear, the boy loses control of his bowels, lets out a massive fart, then fills his trousers. The stench of this was apparently truly appalling, causing the hellish horde to reel in disgust and

Volcano devil



I have this rather spooky postcard in my collection. Notes on the other side suggest that a sailor (?) from HMS Kent bought the card in 1933 at Kagoshima in Japan. The card says "Summit: Devil of volcano". Certainly, the area has several volcanos, but I can't trace anything about the devil depicted. If anyone knows anything further about this image, please let us know.

Mark Greener Cottenham, Cambridge

flee back to the pit, leaving Cellini and friends relieved at their narrow escape, although the boy claims to have seen two of the worst demons flitting across the rooftops, following them as they headed home.

Ian Simmons
Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Claw marks

Regarding the Black Shuck Festival [FT429:66-68]: Robert Halliday doesn't tell the second part of the story, in which the fiery dog travels about 15 miles (24km) across country to Blythburgh church, inflicting similar injuries to building and congregation. The scorched marks of his claws are still visible on the church door. Ironically, these marks are actually the physical remains of a common anti-evil spell, in which a lighted candle would be held against a wall etc so that the heat of the candle would scorch the surface; this was presumably done while saying out loud the relevant words (now lost) to accompany the act. These marks are a common find in old houses; their use seems to span several centuries. In this case they may well have been done soon after Black Shuck's visit in 1577!

Bevis Sale
London

Film curses

With regard to Hollywood curses, my favourites are *Poltergeist* and *The Exorcist*. With the *Exorcist*, a large number of cast and crew died. With *Poltergeist*, real human skeletons were used without the cast being made aware. But the fascinating thing is how these movies cursed *me*. Wednesday night was movie night at my boarding school, and the housemaster was not above renting stuff that was BBFC recommended for older viewers. It would usually be a 15-cert like *Flatliners*, *Duel* or *My Stepmother is an Alien*, but the other boarders would sneak in 18-cert tapes like *Aliens* or *Robocop*. And being the quiet Christian-background kid in this melee was a bewildering experience. It's bad enough getting picked on because you've been brainwashed not to retaliate. But throw into the mix the horrifying vision from *Poltergeist II* of the householder drinking a bottle of Tequila, swallowing the worm, and then vomiting up a Gigeresque demon-worm, played by an amputee covered in slime, and that's more than a developing brain can comfortably handle!

Sometimes I wonder if some of that nonsense would be counted as 'grooming' in the post-80s world, since *Flatliners* is hardly

promoting family values with William Baldwin videotaping his conquests and Julia Roberts being haunted by her needle addict father. And as for *The Exorcist*, my religious mother hid my copy of the book from me. I had to beg for it back, since it was only a book, and I had writerly aspirations. "Look me in the eye," her neighbour-friend said, before taking it from a high shelf and handing it over. Because reading a work of fiction is the same as running a Satanic cult in the back garden.

A number of *Exorcist* actors died, and a plane was struck by lightning. Apparently, a priest at the seminary used approached one of the actors, warning that the Devil would seek retribution for being exposed, and gave him an amulet. The priest was later found by the actor as his body "lay in state" in preparation for his funeral.

Also relating to the *Poltergeist* curse is the grim factoid that the big sister from the first movie was played by an actress who was murdered by her boyfriend, and when he had served his sentence and tried to return to the real world, the burger bar where he worked was targeted by activists handing out flyers that read "The hands that made your burger murdered Dominique Dunne". And then there's JoBeth Williams, who won the part for showing precocious reading ability at her audition, only to be struck down by an intestinal torsion at such a young age.

But there you go, people die. I mean, nobody talks about *The Land Before Time* being a cursed movie because it's not a horror, it's a cartoon about dinosaurs. Yet still the charming young girl who did the voice of Ducky was murdered by her jealous father in a drunken rage. It's more soothing to existential despair to attribute these catastrophes to malevolent spiritual forces, than to acknowledge it's just meaningless statistical clustering.

Final note on the *Poltergeist* curse: the actor who played the ghostly "God is in his Holy Temple" priest, was famous for theatrically devised pieces performed under the influence of LSD. One of the elderly monks in *The Name of the Rose* was hit

by falling masonry in one scene, gashing his forehead, and he said “Don’t worry about it, I’ll be dead soon anyway! Was the shot alright?”

Superman is considered cursed. George Reeves shot himself. Christopher Reeves was paralysed in a polo accident. But the interesting thing here is that due to a rights issue or unpaid earnings, the writers of the 1980s *Superman* had actually formally issued a curse, although they didn’t do it with much flair. No Latin chanting or goat’s blood.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Abandoned Rookeries

In ‘Fairies, Folklore and Fortiana’ [FT429:29], Simon Young asks if there is any non-supernatural reason for rooks abandoning their rookeries. In the West Sussex village where I live, it’s a ‘well-known fact’ that the host tree is going to fall when the rooks abandon a rookery. A long-term resident of the village once ran through past locations of the rookeries for me and explained how quickly each tree had fallen once the rooks departed. “Them rooks seem to know that the tree’s dying”.

I have no idea whether there’s any basis for this theory, but it’s a strongly held local belief. Perhaps rooks can sense a change in the way the tree moves in the wind and know when it’s time to move on?

Joe Blunden

West Sussex

Adam of Usk’s Chronicle

Adam of Usk (c.1352-1430) was a Welsh priest whose chronicle written between 1377 and 1421 gives valuable insights into such events as the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the rebellion of Owen Glyndwr and the deposition of Richard II. His chronicle also records the following wonders and marvels.

1399 – At the time of this parliament, two of the king’s servants dining in London found

in five eggs with which they were served the distinct face of a man, exact in every respect, and having white in place of hair standing clear of the face above the forehead and coming down the cheeks to the chin; and I saw one of them.

In these days was born at Usk a calf which had two tails, two heads, four eyes and four ears. Such another monster saw I also in my youth in the parish of Llancayo, in the house of a certain woman, Llugu daughter of Watkyn by name. There was born too, in the parish of Llanbatoek, a boy with one eye only, placed in his forehead.

1400 – Four little bells, hanging at the four corners of the shrine of Saint Edward at Westminster, ringing of their own accord and with more than human power, miraculously sounded four times in one day, to the great awe and wonder of the brethren.

The spring wherein the head of Llewellyn ap Griffith, last Prince of Wales, was washed after that it was cut off, and which is in the village of Builth, throughout a livelong day did flow in an unmixed stream of blood.

1402 – In my journey hither, first at Cologne and thence right up to Pisa mentioned above, as well by night as by day, I beheld a dreadful comet which went before the sun, a terror to the world – to the clergy which is the sun thereof, and to the knighthood which is its moon – which forecast the death of the Duke of Milan, as it soon after came to pass. His dreaded arms too, a serpent azure swallowing a naked man gules, on a field argent, were then oftentimes seen in the air.

1406 – While I was in Bruges, the above-named Earl of Northumberland and Lord of Bardolf were lodged, the one in the monastery of Eeckhout, and the other in a hospice in the midst of the city. And on the eve of Saint Brice (12th November), in the twilight of the evening, there came from the side of England in the air a ball of fire, greater than a large barrel, lighting up, as it were, the whole world. And as it drew near, all men were astounded

and stood in fear lest the city should be destroyed. But it passed on straight against the belfry of Saint Mary, and, being severed in twain by the blow, it drove apart its two portions to fall over against the doors of the said Earl and Lord: a mighty token, as did afterwards appear, of their ruin.

Mark Hopper

Hull, East Yorkshire

PC49

Melvin J Willin’s feature on musical hauntings [FT427:48-49] brought back memories of radio programmes in which sound enhances atmosphere, though without apparitions. One that springs to mind is an episode of a popular radio police drama.

Archibald Berkeley-Willoughby, officially PC49, Archie to his friends and ‘Fortynine’ to the locals, was the star of his own radio series, created by Alan Stranks. Brian Reece played Fortynine in more than 100 episodes, and the easy-going, quietly courageous copper with the dark handlebar moustache remained popular between 1947 and 1953. Aided on radio by his staunch girlfriend Joan (Joy Shelton), Archie usually solved his cases. Usually.

PC49 had a ghostly encounter I remember well, and I am indebted to Stuart Monk’s comprehensive online episode guide which has enabled me to track it down. ‘The Case of the Haunting Refrain’, broadcast on 9 December 1948, was a masterly example of what can be done with atmospheric radio drama.

The story begins when Archie hears a woman’s soprano voice singing an operatic aria, coming from an empty house. Accompanied by Joan, the doughty PC goes to investigate, but when they enter the house the singing stops, only to begin again when they are

out in the street. Investigation shows that a singer who used to live there is now dead, and the mystery deepens. From the tone of previous PC49 episodes, we have come to expect some explanation. Is the ghostly voice being used as a cover for criminal activity? Is an involved hoax afoot? We eagerly await a rational solution, but none comes. No gramophones or hidden loudspeakers. Just a mystery.

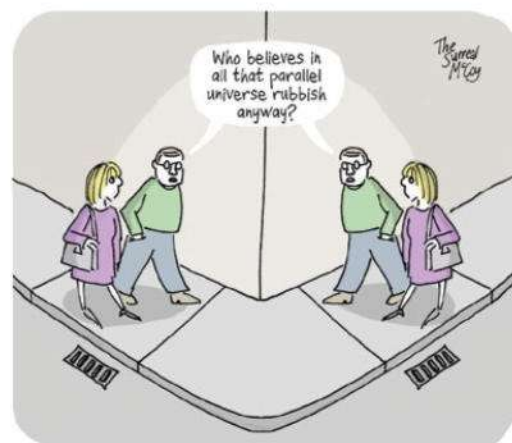
In a nicely worked-out twist, the episode ends with Joan saying to Fortynine with a catch in her voice as the high-pitched singing continues, “Well Archie, it looks as if this is one case that we don’t solve!”

‘Haunting Refrain’ was a gripping episode relying on skilled direction to create the atmosphere of rainy gaslit streets in the 1940s, with crunching footsteps and a simple operatic recording. Radio programmes were often so effective that it was difficult to imagine actors standing round a microphone in a studio. The only special effect in this episode was the echoing quality imparted to the recording of the Haunting Refrain itself.

Fortynine also had his own strip cartoon adventures in the *Eagle* comic of the early 1950s, with the local Boys’ Club helping our hero to solve mysteries. PC 49 also appeared on television. There is also a rare 1951 Hammer Films production of ‘PC 49’, thanks to Hard to Find Films on YouTube. Reference: <A CASE FOR PC 49 1951 uk film Brian Reece rare Hammer film – YouTube>

Peter Ford

Lancaster



It Happened to Me...



Tintern orbs

In early December 2019 my boyfriend and I spent a couple of days in Tintern, Monmouthshire, and spent some time exploring the beautiful ruins of Tintern Abbey and taking loads of photos. Later, when looking through the photos, we noticed four small glowing orbs in a panoramic photo of the Abbey (shown above). Could this be a glitch in the panoramic function on my phone (iPhone 4s)? Something that could be easily explained by an expert? Or something else? Any ideas anyone?

Emma Daniel

Penclawdd, Swansea

Strange hitchhiker

Helen Sharp's recollection of a strange figure encountered at a lonely crossroads [FT428:67] brought to mind an incident that happened to me 28 years ago that I still find odd on reflection.

On 25 February 1995 I was returning to Lancashire from a concert in Leeds. This was at the height of 'BritPop' and the bands Supergrass and the Bluetones had been performing at the Duchess of York – an excellent and much-missed rock venue. After the gig, I drove slowly back along the A59 through a real pea-souper fog which limited visibility to 20 or so yards. The road was very quiet with little or no traffic

about. The journey was taking much longer than usual and it must have been close to midnight by the time we reached the village of Gisburn just over the border into Lancashire. Both of my passengers (my girlfriend – now wife – and my younger cousin) were asleep.

Driving slowly through the foggy village, illuminated by pools of light from the streetlamps, I was astonished to suddenly see a man thumbing a lift at the junction of the A59 and the A682 to Nelson (often dubbed "Britain's most dangerous road"). The fact that someone was looking to hitch a lift at that time of night was surprising to say the least, but it was the man's outfit that really gave the encounter an uncanny edge.

As I slowly drove by (I had no intention of stopping), the man had his left 'thumbing' arm extended, while the other held an old-fashioned squarish suitcase. He wore a long 1950s style trenchcoat, belted at the waist. His hair was slicked back and he wore a pair of thick, round-framed glasses. He looked entirely 'out of time' as if he'd stepped out of another era. The encounter was over in a few seconds – I was so startled that I shook my cousin awake, but of course he'd seen nothing.

The man may well have been some poor down-and-out; the time, location and weather conditions make a practical joke seem unlikely. I've driven that road hundreds of times since

but have seen nothing else unusual.

Nick Harling

Ribchester, Lancashire

Missed birthday party

The experience described below leads me to believe that humans possess a "forgotten" sixth sense. But first, I feel the need to offer a bit of background.

In the early 1990s I was a Crime Scene Investigator based in Eastbourne. As a 'scientist' I was very sceptical of anything 'paranormal'. I had recently separated from my then wife and had been reduced to living in a two-berth caravan in a friend's garden. This was before mobile phones and Internet were commonplace – if I was 'called out' overnight I had a pager that buzzed and I had to drive to the nearest telephone box and ring the control room for details.

I attended a burglary at a flat and was interested to see that the female occupant had poster-sized Tarot images in her hallway. I asked her about them and she said she was a psychic and had written a book about goddesses (which I have never been able to find).

In hindsight, I very inappropriately said: "If you are psychic, I would have thought you would have known you were going to be burgled... Sorry, but I don't

believe in any of that stuff".

She replied that she would change my view and if I wanted, she would cook me a meal and do a reading for me. (I now realise how inappropriate it was to accept her offer, but I was young and foolish).

Anyway, on my next 'rest day' I found myself at her flat again. I had not given her any information about myself; all she had was a first name. Also, I am originally from Northamptonshire, miles away from Eastbourne, and Google wasn't around then. We had a lovely meal and she then read my cards. She told me several things – you are single etc – which I believed she could have easily 'cold read', and she used a lot of 'Barnum statements', leaving me unimpressed until she said: "There is something about you that I don't understand. It involves you and your sister, and your fifth birthday, and you have never forgiven her."

In pre-Internet days and only having my first name, how did she know that many miles away and many years earlier, my sister had been born unexpectedly at home on my fifth birthday, meaning I never got my planned fifth birthday party?

I forget the fortune teller's name, but I would like to thank her for sparking my interest in fortune matters. If you are reading this, please write in with the name of your book.

DW (name and address on file)
By email

Grandfather's promise

When I was small I was very close to my maternal grandfather as we shared similar interests. I remember when I was about six him saying to me that when he had “kicked the bucket” that he would contact me to show me that there was life beyond death, not as a ghost but that he would send me a message to prove this.

I was 30 when he died in December 2007. Some six months later, I was working on a child and adolescent psychiatric ward and felt an incredibly strong urge to read the latest copy of the *Gazette*, a magazine put together by patients for patients. I normally would just offer a cursory glance, but felt that I had to read this copy especially.

I opened the magazine at random and there was a poem called ‘Me Old Chinas for Export’, and underneath in the second paragraph was the line “the bosses name, Edward Wedgwood” – my maternal grandfather’s name. I was left shaken and shocked initially, but then realised perhaps it was grandad keeping his promise to show me that there was a life after this existence. I have never been able to explain it in any other way.

Phil Brand
London

Spooky screen shot

Around mid-January 2023 I borrowed several books from Bristol’s Central Library, among them a ghost novel called *The Apparition Phase*, subtitled “Some ghosts never leave you.” The book was not to my taste; I read half and put it aside, ready to return to the library.

Today [4 February] I was scrolling through the photos on my phone when I came across a screenshot of *The Apparition Phase* sitting on a patterned cushion I’ve never seen before. I checked the metadata to find that the screenshot was taken in mid-November.

How can I have unknowingly



"That stretch of road seemed to have a peculiar air of menace about it"

screenshotted a book I was going to borrow almost two months before I borrowed it? I’m certain that if I’d heard of the book and been interested in it to the point of screenshotting it, I’d at least have had some memory of doing so when I subsequently found it in the library.

I’m a keen photographer and often scroll through my photos to share or print them, so I know what’s in the folder. However, I’m certain I’ve never seen that screenshot before today. I am utterly bewildered, and given the subject matter of the novel, slightly alarmed!

In the last month I’ve been engrossed in Robert Lebling’s wonderful survey of djinn-lore in the Arabic speaking world. Perhaps a mischievous djinni popped in to visit and left a very 21st century calling card?

Therese Whitelock
Brentry, Bristol

Ominous Glencoe

In response to Alan Murdie’s Ghostwatch column ‘Spirits of Glencoe’ [FT428:18-21], let me describe my own experience at Glencoe. About 20 years ago, my girlfriend of the time and I were driving north from Glasgow to Inverness via Fort William. She

was driving while I was looking at the scenery. We had been driving for quite some time when the road twisted around a bleak landscape with high crags on either side. My exact words to her were: “[Expletive deleted] I wouldn’t want to be stuck here for the night...”

The only words to describe the sensation I experienced were those of horror cliché – it was a sense of foreboding, of oppression. That stretch of road seemed to have a peculiar air of menace about it, almost, in fact, as if I were encountering a hostile presence. Unlike the experiences mentioned in the FT column, there was no fog, mist, or rain. It was early afternoon with a clear sky. Only a little further on we passed a sign – Glencoe. Prior to that, I had no idea where we might be and nor did my girlfriend, who was English and unfamiliar with the trip, as was I... and we had no Sat-Nav then. Also, other than the name ‘Glencoe Massacre’ I knew nothing at that time about the events of the massacre, so there was no sense of expectation or anticipation that might have explained my experience. In fact, I had no idea that the route we had taken passed through Glencoe and I wouldn’t even have been able to pinpoint Glencoe on a map.

In later years, after reading Jacques Yonnett’s *Paris Noir*, I wondered whether Glencoe had an ominous, oppressive atmosphere because of the events which had taken place there, or whether there had already

existed an ominous and oppressive atmosphere which invited such a happening.

Andrew Barr
Glasgow

Spinning light

Tania Thomas’s account of a UAP [FT423:65] has prompted me to relate my own recent encounter. I spend a lot of time in the kitchen of the bungalow where I live [in Pinner], watching the local wildlife – in particular a beautiful red kite that often swoops over the rooftops. One early August afternoon, I saw an unusually large flock of seagulls to the east. There must have been around 30 or so and I went out into the garden for a better look.

As I watched them move across the sky, I became aware of a light high up to the south-west. At first I thought it was the Sun reflecting off a plane (I live under the Heathrow flight path), but it didn’t appear to be moving at all. As I watched, I got the distinct impression that it was revolving as the light seemed to fade in and out. There was little or no cloud cover to explain why the light was fading intermittently, but I instinctively felt it was spinning. A quick Google check confirmed that it was too high and too early to be Venus. It remained stationary throughout, but I couldn’t seem to get a proper fix on it as I tried to take a photo on my phone. After about 10 minutes of watching this object I suddenly grew very lethargic and had to go indoors and sit down.

The following afternoon, I went back into the garden to throw out some bread for the mob of magpies who are always watching from the rooftop opposite. I suddenly saw a light moving at speed across the sky from west to east in the same place where I had watched the UAP the day before. As it moved across my eyeline, it suddenly did an abrupt right turn and blinked out of existence as if it had entered a portal. I am still at a loss to explain these sightings but so far there has been no repetition.

Richard Carey
Pinner, Middlesex

El Mirador mistake



The report on the Maya city of El Mirador [FT429:12] is in error. The site was not ‘found’ with LIDAR, because it had not been lost. It was merely a new survey with modern technology. El Mirador was discovered by archaeologists in the 1930s, and the first description of the site was published by early Mayanist Sylvanus Morley in 1937-1938 (Sylvanus G Morley, 5 vols, Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1937-38, Washington D.C.: vol.I, p.102). In my collection I have a volume of the Spanish-language journal *Mesoamérica*, June 1984 (year 5, no.7), which contains a study of El Mirador, including the precise location, with area map and site plan.

In 2000, while I was living in Guatemala, I hiked out to the site after arranging a guide in the nearest real town of note, Flores, capital of the Petén Department of northern Guatemala. My journey involved taking a pickup truck to Carmelita, the last, end-of-the-road, jungle hamlet, and then hiking for two days through the rain forest to get to El Mirador. The whole area was dotted with Maya ruins. My young guide from Carmelita had planned that we camp at El Mirador, which had a basic hut and overgrown airstrip. At that time, the ruins were completely unrestored and were covered in jungle. However, looters stole our provisions while we were exploring the ruins and we high-tailed it to the nearby site of Nakbé, about half a day’s hike away, which had custodians taking care of the ruins in preparation for the archaeological digging season.

Over the past decade or so, the ruins of El Mirador have been heavily promoted by INGUAT, the Guatemalan institute of tourism, after some spectacular finds during excavations. I believe it is easier to get to the site now, and arrival via helicopter is possible.

I well remember, in 2000, standing on top of an overgrown pyramid at El Mirador and seeing nothing but jungle to the far horizon in all directions, knowing that there were no human settlements there and also knowing, with the pace of forest clearance, that the view would not remain pristine for long. I do not believe it would be the same now, 23 years later.

I attach a couple of photos I took back in 2000 by way of proof that I did indeed visit the site. One shows the exposed wall of a pyramid (about the only exposed stonework at the time), the other [inset] is a sculpted limestone stela.

Simon Burchell
Haslemere, Surrey

Killjoy reductionist

Charles Foster goes full Fox Mulder on ecstasy in his review of *The Superhumanities* [FT427:51]. He *really* wants to believe we’re all telepathic, telekinetic, death-defying superhumans. And we’d have gotten away with it too if it wasn’t for those pesky killjoy reductionists. Having been a subscriber to *Fortean Times* for 30 years (all without reading a single computer manual) I know there are people who have a deep desire for the supernatural to be real, and this very human desire is a fascinating phenomenon in itself. But then there is the piffling, depressing matter of evidence – not your intuitions or your lived experience, or what religion “insists” – but actual evidence. The evidence remains conspicuously absent. If you believe in fairies you can clap your hands until they are red and raw, but it won’t make a single fairy exist.

Martin Stubbs
London

Fortean topics

Over the many decades of reading FT, I have come to some conclusions about three current fortean topics, which may be of interest to readers.

Time Travel: Although I don’t believe that this will ever come about, there are those who do, and there is one fact I should like to point out. There is no such thing as ‘the present’, except when we use the phrase when talking about ‘this month’ or ‘this year’ etc. as a convenient time reference. We are travelling into the future all the time; when one second has gone by it has created the past; in other words time is a continuum. This leads to two concepts when discussing time travel, i.e. as we are already travelling into the future, the mechanism for speeding up time travel into the far future would require a quite different method from travelling into the past. So time travel into the past would be “going against the grain” so to speak, which would be much more difficult to achieve than travelling into the future. (How-

ever, despite my pessimistic view on time travel, I enjoy the early science fiction of HG Wells, *The Time Machine* being my favourite work of fiction, as well as being a fan of Doctor Who, in particular the original Doctor played by the one and only William Hartnell.)

The Loch Ness Monster: There has been a recent discovery of prehistoric plesiosaurs that could swim in fresh water about 100 million years ago (see FT423:10-11), which has led to the revival of the theory that Nessie could be something like a plesiosaur. However, as Loch Ness was formed only 10,000 years ago, this is impossible. Another problem concerning Nessie is that if there is such a creature, there must be many more breeding individuals, which would surely have been noticed many times by the locals over the centuries. In any case, there are legends of lake monsters all over the world, none of which has been substantiated.

Ancient Aliens: The *nearest* star to our Solar System is about four light years away, and with the rockets we have now, a journey to the star would take over 70,000 years. Unless we develop something like warp drive, or other improbable methods of space travel, this precludes humans travelling amongst the stars. A while ago I listened to a radio interview with a NASA scientist who, when asked whether she thought we ever could achieve such developments, laughed and said decidedly *no!* The same problem would also occur with advanced life-forms from exoplanets, which is extremely unlikely considering the distances involved. So the idea that they came to Earth thousands of years ago and interfered with the development of ancient humans, or helped them build their sometimes colossal structures, is highly implausible. And more importantly those who believe in such things forget the boundless ingenuity and imagination of *Homo sapiens* (and *Homo Neanderthalensis*?). Also, if aliens *did* help out early humans, why did they leave and have never bothered to *openly* visit us again over the millennia?

Eric Fitch
Hereford

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

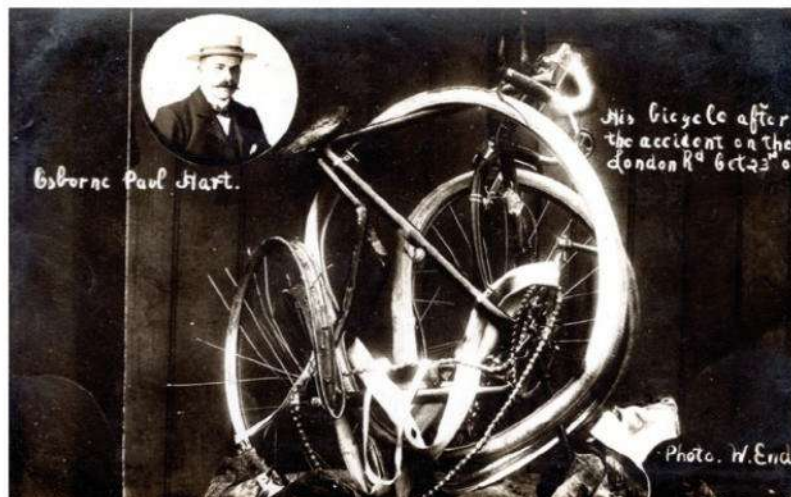


JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast relates the tragic tale of an early fatality caused by a motor car and the later military valour of its driver

35. THE SAD FATE OF OSBORNE PAUL HART

Osborne Paul Hart was born in Chobham, Surrey, in 1878, the son of the gardener James Hart and his wife Annie. On 23 October 1906, he set off on an excursion on his bicycle, pedalling along Westwood Road. Another cyclist, the labourer Frederick Butler, saw him coming and dismounted from his own machine to allow him to pass. Butler saw Hart cycling towards the main London Road, when there was a sudden crash and an outcry. When Butler reached the London Road, he could see Hart lying in the road, with a motor-car nearby. His bicycle had been hit with some considerable force. Hart was taken to the Ascot Cottage Hospital, but his spine had been fractured and he died the same night.

George Alexander Lechmere Paton was born in Dublin in August 1885, the son of Colonel George Blagrove Paton. After education at Eton, at the Army College in Farnham and at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, he was gazetted second lieutenant in the Northumberland Fusiliers in 1905. His regiment was stationed at Aldershot, where he kept a powerful motor-car. On 23 October 1906, he wanted to try this vehicle out, driving at speed along the country lanes. The gardener Edward John Mears saw him going past at 40 or 50 miles an hour; he had never seen a motor-car go so fast. The carter Henry Yarlett also saw the motor-car passing him "like a flash of lightning". A cyclist was coming out of Westwood Road, and there was an almighty crash as it passed in front of the car.



LEFT: The postcard printed to commemorate Hart's death, showing the mangled remains of his bicycle.

There was widespread public anger among the locals that one of their own had been done to death in such a dramatic manner. Osborne Paul Hart had been a steady and popular young man, and his family were respectable country people. A picture postcard was printed, showing his photograph and the badly bent remains of his bicycle (shown above). At the coroner's inquest, there was quite a gathering of furious country people who wanted to have a look at Lieutenant Paton. At the conclusion of the first hearing, Paton was hissed by the hostile crowd, and as he took off in his lethal motor-car, stones were thrown after the vehicle. At the second hearing, Paton said that at the time of the accident he had been driving very carefully, at around 20 miles an hour. All of a sudden, the careless cyclist had pedalled out into the road. Paton had shouted and made use of the horn, but the cyclist had gone diagonally across the road right in front of his car. After twice intimating that they were unable to agree, the coroner's jury eventually returned an

open verdict on 31 October. Since a hostile crowd, armed with bricks and stones, was waiting outside the courtroom, the fearful Lieutenant left through the back door.

But the coroner's inquest was not the end of the story, not by any means. The friends of Osborne Paul Hart communicated with Mr Francis Marnham, the MP for Chertsey, and he agitated that Lieutenant Paton should face trial for manslaughter. On 5 November, when the 'Windsor Motor Fatality' was discussed in Parliament, Attorney-General Sir John Walton could report that the chief constable had decided to take proceedings against the driver of the car, and that summonses had been issued. Lieutenant Paton faced trial for manslaughter at the Berkshire Petty Sessions, held at Windsor in early December. All the witnesses to the accident told their stories, and several people testified that the road was a very dangerous spot, a lady cyclist having been run down and injured there two years earlier. Assessing the evidence, the magistrates said

that in their opinion, Lieutenant Paton was not guilty: no accident would have happened had the cyclist not attempted to cross the road in front of the motor-car driven by the defendant. The Lieutenant might have been travelling very fast, but he was not responsible for the cyclist's death. Lieutenant

Paton received the congratulations of his friends at this happy verdict, looking much relieved at being a free man.

After this, Lieutenant Paton soldiered on for one more year, before joining the Reserve of Officers in 1907. He devoted his life to sporting activities, including punting, golfing and motor racing. He rejoined the Northampton Fusiliers at the outbreak of war in 1914, being gazetted to the 8th battalion of his regiment. They did not equip him with a powerful motor car, on a mission to run down German cyclists, but sent him to Turkey with the Mediterranean Expedition Force, fighting at the Dardanelles. He distinguished himself on active service, being promoted Captain in February 1915. He valiantly led his company in the fierce fighting that ensued, being spoken of as a gallant leader of men by his battalion commander, but on 10 August 1915, a Turkish sniper shot him right between the eyes. Captain Paton is buried near Chocolate Hill, far away from the humble resting-place of Osborne Paul Hart.



136. Aokigahara, Japan

EMILIA UKKONEN shares an unsettling trip to the Mount Fuji's vast, haunted 'Sea of Trees', an area that has become notorious as Japan's 'Suicide Forest'



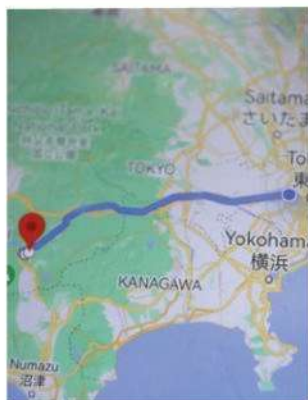
PHOTOS: EMILIA UKKONEN

ABOVE: Aokigahara's bumpy, moss-covered forest floor. **BELOW:** The 'Suicide Forest' is only a two-hour bus journey from Tokyo.

My trip to the forest of Aokigahara started from Shinjuku station in central Tokyo. From here, I could travel straight to the town where my guesthouse was located. The bus was rather empty, so I had both seats to myself for relaxing and looking out the window as we left Tokyo, first by the highway and then on to smaller roads that revealed dense forests and lush vegetation. We passed streams and small towns, and after about two hours arrived at my destination: Mount Fuji Station, in the small town of Fujikawaguchiko.

Since there were still strict COVID controls against entering Japan, there were hardly any foreign visitors, even though this is usually a popular tourist destination. The town

Many people enter the forest; some never leave



seemed deserted. There were no people to be seen on the streets, and some of the houses appeared to be abandoned, with spider webs covering their entrances. A crushed praying mantis lying in the street was the first sight that greeted me. Had I come to a ghost town? It all seemed rather ominous, especially as the next day I was going on a trip to the infamous Aokigahara 'suicide forest'.

Aokigahara, meaning "sea of trees" or "meadow of blue trees", is a dense forest near Mount Fuji. It's some 30km² (11.6 square miles) in extent and is believed to be haunted, home to the Japanese ghosts called *yurei*. Many people enter the forest; some never leave. Aokigahara has become a place where people go to commit

suicide. Every year, countless people take their own lives among this vast ocean of trees.

My plan was to take a local bus to the start of the walking trail – apparently, this is also the usual route for people going into the forest to take their own lives. Unlike them, I had bought a return bus ticket to Tokyo.

From Mount Fuji station, it's a 45-minute bus ride to the start of the forest trail. The place is not as isolated as you might think – in fact, a lot of buses filled with happy school children visit the forest daily because of its famous caves. A tourist shop selling ice cream, T-shirts and other souvenirs is the first thing that greets visitors.

At the very entrance of the forest, though, I notice that the battery of my 35mm camera is dead. It was fully charged and working fine just the day before when I took some pictures. This is a tell-tale sign of a haunted place. Luckily, I had brought a digital camera too.

The forest is strangely quiet – the black lava rock absorbs the sounds – and feels distinctly eerie. I hear no bird song or even leaves rustling in the wind. It's a place marked as much by beauty as by tragedy. Everything is covered with green moss. Many of the trees cannot grow tall because they have sprouted in the hardened lava that underlies the woodland and their roots cannot penetrate very far into the tufa. These roots are mostly above ground, forming tangled waves, and the forest floor is rough and bumpy.

Hundreds of people have taken their own lives here. If you stray from the trail, it's not uncommon to come across abandoned campsites, scraps of cut nooses dangling in the moss-covered trees and even human remains.

Places are coloured by our thoughts and feelings about them. This is a place that has been much popularised and sensationalised in movies and on the Internet. I don't know to what extent my preconceptions of the place are affecting my experience there.



ABOVE LEFT: Ice creams, drinks and T-shirts are available for visitors before they venture into the 'Suicide Forest'. ABOVE RIGHT: An information sign at the entrance to the forest. BELOW: In the 'Sea of Trees': "I don't feel very comfortable. I don't go very deep into the forest."

I would not describe the forest as spooky or scary in any conventional sense, but I feel that there is something here, something in the atmosphere telling me that things are not quite right. It's not a sense of outright hostility, but I do not feel welcome.

I had come to Japan to investigate the country's supernatural beliefs, especially beliefs about Japanese ghosts – *yurei* – and to talk to people who have seen them. I have had my own experiences – feeling presences, hearing voices and odd sounds – without actually having seen a ghost, but I have met a lot of people who claim to have laid eyes on them. I don't know exactly what the things we call ghosts really are – perhaps they are time shifts, glimpses of the past or of parallel universes and spaces – but I do know that there is something to these phenomena beyond mere human imagination.

And now I am alone in one of the most haunted places in Japan. I don't actually want to see a ghost here, at least not now, not alone. I am only here to take some photos. I don't feel very comfortable. I don't go very deep into the forest.

I believe that strong emotions somehow remain in the atmosphere and are absorbed by places themselves, as sounds are imprinted on cassette tape. Places that have

witnessed tragedy often seem to become haunted. If this forest is not haunted by spirits, it is definitely haunted by memories.

Several days later, back in

Tokyo, I empty my case and come across a small plastic bag containing acorns that I took from the forest. They have started to sprout.



I ask the I Ching about my visit to the forest and my art project. The I Ching says that I need to go back in order to finish my work. I mull it over and even book another guest house room, this one closer to the forest, only to cancel it a few days before I am due to arrive. I do not feel comfortable about going back. I feel that something or someone does not want me to return, that I am not welcome. The feeling is very strong and only disappears after I cancel my reservation.

Later, I ask the I Ching what would have happened if I had gone back to Aokigahara.

Difficulties

Being close to deer without preparation.

Thinking about going into the midst of the woods.

The noble one almost doesn't seem to stop.

Going is inadequate

A special opportunity presents itself that one isn't prepared for. To make use of it, one would need to go deep into an unknown situation. This is not a good idea; one needs to resist the temptation.

❖ EMILIA UKKONEN is a visual artist from Finland and has a fascination with everything paranormal. She spent three months in Japan investigating the supernatural.

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is

in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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HELLO, WHAT? YES? YOU'VE SEEN A BIG CAT, MADAM? I SEE... HOW BIG?

RING!!

REALLY BIG! HMM... OH? ITS UNBELIEVABLY BIG? AND IT EXISTS IN ANOTHER DIMENSION?

YOU WANT ME TO INVESTIGATE AN INTERGALACTIC, MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ALIEN BIG CAT SIGHTING?

AND YOU'RE OFFERING HOW MUCH? I'M ON MY WAY!

C'MON- A FEE'S A FEE!

BING BONG!

COME THIS WAY, MR. BULL... THE BIG CAT IS HERE...

Ahemé MADAM, THIS IS A BIG CAT, BUT IT DOES NOT EXCEED THE BOUNDS OF CREDIBILITY IN TERMS OF SIZE!

OH NO... THIS ISN'T THE BIG CAT... THIS IS OUR HOUSE CAT, TARDIS!

YES... WHO'S A FLUFFY OLD TARDIS, THEN?

TARDIS? PRRR...

NO, THE COZMIC ABC IS INSIDE TARDIS!

YE...EES... AND HOW, PRAY, DO WE ENTER A NEW DIMENSION INSIDE A CAT?

PRR

WHAT?!

YOU HAVE GOT TO BE KIDDING, EMERSON!

voice of Emerson
NO, REALLY! TARDIS IS BIGGER...

... INSIDE THAN OUT! YES, I'D GUESSED ALL THAT... BUT FOR PETE'S SAKE! DIMENSIONAL TRAVEL THROUGH A CAT'S ARSE? REALLY?!

WELL, THAT'S WHAT IT SAYS IN THE SCRIPT!

YEAH, AND WE KNOW WHO WRITES THE SCRIPT...

AND YOUR READER EXPECTS IT OF YOU!

OH, HER! WELL, OK- I CAN'T DISAPPOINT HER...

BUT I SHALL COMPLAIN TO OUR AGENT!

WE DRAW A MERCIFUL VEIL OVER GULLY'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE PORTAL! BUT- ONCE HE'S IN THERE...

POP!

THE RETURN TRIP IS LESS PROBLEMATIC...

THAT'S CERTAINLY A COZMIC-SIZED CAT- BUT ITS DEAD!

OF COURSE ITS DEAD! YOU'D BE DEAD IF YOU'D BEEN UP A CATS BUM FOR MILLIONS OF YEARS!

WAIT A MINUTE! IS THIS ALL A POLITICAL TACTIC? "THROWING A DEAD CAT IN THE ROOM" TO DISTRACT FROM SOME AWKWARD FACT?

er... Yes...

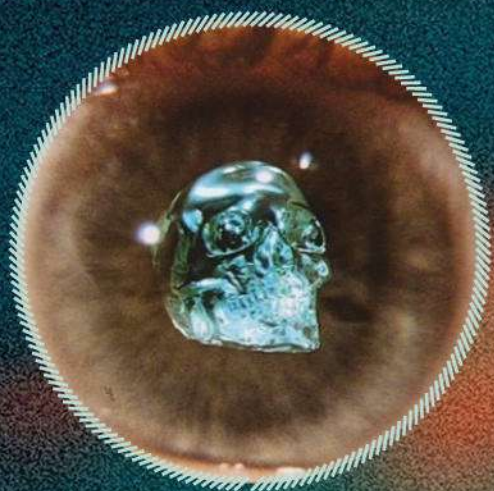
COME ON- WHAT IS IT?

...I haven't got an ending to this comic...

SO, MR. BULL, DO WE GET IN TO FORTUNE TIMES?

I'M SORRY, MADAM- NO! GOOD DAY!

COMING NEXT MONTH



SPOON-BENDERS & STIGMATICS

ARTHUR C CLARKE'S
WORLD OF STRANGE POWERS



THE MONSTER IN THE MIRROR

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE
LEGEND OF BLOODY MARY

+ GARTH MARENGHI,
WEIRD WEEKEND,
SAWSTON SPOOKS
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 432
ON SALE 18 MAY 2023

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Despite Turkish authorities deeming Ozgur Gevrekoglu's death after being shot by his dog (**FT428:72**) so improbable that they were treating it as a possible murder, only a few weeks later an unnamed 32-year-old man from Wichita, Kansas, met with a similar end. The man was found dead near Geuda Springs, Oklahoma, sitting in the front passenger seat of a pick-up, with hunting gear, his dog and a rifle in the backseat. The sheriff's office said: "A canine belonging to the owner of the pickup stepped on the rifle causing the weapon to discharge. The fired round struck the passenger who died of his injuries on scene." *mirror.co.uk*, 24 Jan 2023.

A 61-year-old butcher working in the Sheung Shui Slaughterhouse on the outskirts of Hong Kong had immobilised a pig with an electric stun gun and was about to kill it with a 40-cm (15 inch) meat cleaver, when the animal regained consciousness and knocked him to the ground. A colleague found the man unconscious, still clutching the meat cleaver and with a serious wound on his left foot. He was taken to hospital, but was later declared dead, although police said the cause of death had yet to be determined. There was no word as to the fate of the pig. *edition.cnn.com*, 21 Jan 2023.

Francisco Barajah, 39, pastor and founder of the Santa Trindade Evangelical Church in Messica, Mozambique, decided to emulate Jesus's actions in the Gospel of Matthew by fasting for 40 days. After 25 days without food or water, Barajah had suffered dramatic weight loss and could no longer stand, so was taken to hospital at the insistence of relatives. There, he was diagnosed with acute anaemia and failure of his digestive organs. He was rehydrated and given liquid nutrition, but could not be saved and died shortly after arrival. Barajah and his parishioners frequently fasted, but not for such long periods. However, Barajah's brother, Marques Manuel Barajah, denied that it was the fast that killed him, saying: "The truth is that my brother suffered from low blood pressure." *BBC News*, 16 Feb 2023.

Shortly after returning from work in Ballinasloe, Ireland, Corey O'Keefe heard his landlord Jasper Kraus, 67, shout "come quick!" from his garden, where

he kept various animals. O'Keefe found him lying in a pool of blood, bleeding heavily from a large wound on the back of his leg. He called paramedics, then performed CPR on Kraus for 25 minutes until they arrived; during this time Kraus whispered "rooster" as he lost consciousness. O'Keefe had also contacted Kraus's daughter Virginia, who lived nearby, and when she arrived, she followed a trail of blood that led from her father to

one of his Brahma chickens, which had blood on its claws. Despite the efforts of paramedics, Kraus died of a heart attack brought on by the loss of blood, and at the inquest Virginia said that she knew the chicken was responsible as it has previously attacked her daughter. She had told her father to get rid of the bird as a result, but as an animal lover he had refused. "People should be aware of the signs and get rid of any bird as soon as they show signs of aggression," she said. *dailymail.co.uk*, 16 Feb 2023.

Indonesian police arrested Mikhael Oi for the murder of his fiancé Augustina Rere, 35, after she was admitted to hospital with a serious head injury, which resulted in her death from brain damage the following day. Before she died, she told police that she had been suffering sustained abuse from Oi because she refused to have sex before marriage, and that he had inflicted the head injury by hitting her with a wrench after she caught him having sex with a cow on their farm. Oi was likely to face at least 15 years for Rere's murder. *yahoo.com*, 17 Feb 2023.

For a flight out of Blackpool Airport in a Piper PA-28-161 light aircraft in June 2022, the pilot asked another pilot to accompany him for safety reasons due to windy weather. As the pilot took off, his colleague said "looks good, there is nothing behind you", then his head rolled back in the seat, leading the pilot to think he was playing a joke and pretending to be asleep. Even though the man slumped against the pilot when the plane turned, he continued to think he was joking until landing, after which he realised something was wrong. The co-pilot, 57, had passed a medical examination only four months before, but had died of a massive heart attack after take-off. Reviewing the case, the Civil Aviation Authority said that the rarity of accidents caused by cardiac events in flight "suggests the balance is currently about right". *BBC News*, 21 Feb 2023.



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